

The management and editorial team of The Hills Times extend their sincere gratitude to our valued readers, dedicated hawkers, and all our well-wishers for their continued trust, support, and encouragement. There will be no publication of The Hills Times on March 4, 2026, as our office will remain closed on March 3, 2026 on account of Holi. We wish you all a very happy Holi

-Publisher

# THE HILLS TIMES

27 YEARS OF DEDICATED JOURNALISM

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Government of Assam  
Public Works (Roads) Department  
Northeast Frontier Railway

## New Milestone in Easing Traffic in Guwahati

◀ Inauguration of ▶

# Dinesh Goswami Flyover

Bharalumukh, Guwahati



Fastest completed rail overbridge in North East

Chief Guest

**Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma**  
Chief Minister, Assam

August Presence

**Smti Bijuli Kalita Medhi**  
MP, Guwahati HPC

**Shri Ramendra Narayan Kalita**  
MLA, West Guwahati LAC

4 March 2026

5:00 PM

Sonaram Playground, Bharalumukh, Guwahati

### JOINT INITIATIVE

State Govt share  
**₹56.5**  
crore

Indian Railways share  
**₹42.5**  
crore

Total Project Cost  
**₹99**  
crore+

Length  
**1.05 km**

### Key Benefits

- Uninterrupted traffic over railway line
- Reduction in rail crossing-related accidents
- Decrease in air & noise pollution
- Upgradation of urban infrastructure

DIPR/D/HL/309/3-Mar-26

# Tata Steel to invest ₹ 11,000 crore in Jharkhand for developing advanced grade steel

**RANCHI, March 2:** Tata Steel will invest ₹ 11,000 crore in Jharkhand for developing advanced grade steel at its Jamshedpur facility, Tata Group Chairman N Chandrasekaran said on Monday.

The technology developed by the Tata Group for advanced steel production will benefit other steelmakers, too, he said.

"Tata Steel will invest ₹ 11,000 crore in Jharkhand for developing advanced green steel technology, pioneered by it with low carbon production... It will make the steel process faster and reduce carbon emission," Chandrasekaran said, sharing the stage with CEO TV Narendran and Chief Minister Hemant Soren.

The steel major has pioneered and developed the technology, and its first investment will be in Jamshedpur, he said.

"It is a very important project for Tata Steel's footprint globally, and this technology will also benefit other steel companies," Chandrasekaran said.

Following successful pilot trials in the Netherlands, Tata Steel plans to establish a commercial-scale facility of around 1 million tonnes per annum capacity in Jamshedpur by 2030.

Besides, Tata Motors will also invest in hydrogen trucks at the Jamshedpur facility, he said. "Tata Motors' investment in hydrogen trucks is strategically important, the scope of which is significant for domestic and global players," Chandrasekaran said.

He also said the Tata Group will form an experts' panel to explore investment in various sectors for the development of Jharkhand, "as suggested by the chief minister".

Chandrasekaran said he had a two-hour long meeting with the CM, where Tata Group officials discussed plans for development of the state, from where Tata Steel began its journey and expanded globally.

"We feel at home in Jharkhand. We have a



large steel plant here besides Tata Motors," he said.

"We want to partner with the state in many initiatives. Wherever we can we want to contribute for its development. Definitely, we want to open some hotels in the state. We are looking at Ranchi first, and then other locations," the top company official said.

He said a lot of work needs to be done in the skill development sector, as the state has ambitious plans.

"We will definitely partner with the state in upgrading and creating new skills at a much larger scale. We will also increase our CSR footprint in Jharkhand," Chandrasekaran said.

Chief Minister Soren said he had a fruitful meeting with Chandrasekaran. "Had a constructive meeting with Shri N Chandrasekaran, Chairman of the Tata Group, to further strengthen our enduring partnership. We discussed aligning our shared efforts with Jharkhand's long-term development aspirations and Vision 2050 - focused on sustainable growth, knowledge economy, innovation-led progress and inclusive transformation," Soren posted on X.

Earlier, the state government and Tata Steel had signed a Letter of Intent (LoI) and an MoU on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum (WEF), Davos, for investment of over ₹ 11,000 crore in 'New Age Green Steel Technologies', aimed at supporting India's transition towards

low-carbon, environmentally responsible industrial growth, while generating substantial direct and indirect employment opportunities.

The partnership will bring advanced green steel technologies from the Netherlands and Germany to Jharkhand, positioning the state as a key contributor to the global shift towards sustainable manufacturing, officials said.

"A major component of the proposed investment involves deploying HISARNA and EASyMelt ironmaking technologies, with an estimated investment of ₹ 7,000 crore. The HISARNA technology enables the use of domestic coal and low-grade iron ore, thereby reducing dependence on imported raw materials and improving cost efficiency. When integrated with carbon capture and storage solutions, the technology has the potential to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by up to 80 per cent," an official said.

The EASyMelt (Electrically Assisted Syngas Melter) technology, a first-of-its-kind global solution, is designed to enhance the sustainability of conventional blast furnace operations. By reducing coke consumption through the use of syngas, it can lower carbon emissions by up to 50 per cent, he said.

In addition to ironmaking technologies, the investment package includes ₹ 1,500 crore for the establishment of a modern Combi Mill and ₹ 2,600 crore for the expansion of Tinplate facilities.

These initiatives are intended to strengthen Jharkhand's industrial ecosystem, support high-skilled employment, and enhance long-term competitiveness in a decarbonising global economy, the official said, adding, collectively, these projects position Jharkhand and Tata Steel among the early adopters of large-scale green ironmaking technologies.

As Jharkhand marks 25 years of its formation, the agreement represents a milestone in the state's evolving industrial trajectory, he said. (PTI)

## DeepTech Hackathon ignites next wave of semiconductor and AI innovation

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, March 2:** The India Electronics and Semiconductor Association (IESA), in collaboration with GlobalFoundries India, NXP Semiconductors and the Inter Institutional Inclusive Innovations Center (I4C), announced the winners of the DeepTech Hackathon Grand Finale at the IESA Vision Summit 2026.

The hackathon was designed as a national platform to identify and nurture young engineering talent as India advances toward a self-reliant semiconductor ecosystem.

With the country accelerating its ambitions under the India Semiconductor Mission, organisers said strengthening capabilities across the entire semiconductor value chain has become imperative.

The DeepTech Hackathon challenged participants to develop AI-enabled Electronic Design Automation (EDA) workflows for an "Edge AI-based Defect Classification System for Semiconductor Images," addressing real-world manufacturing challenges and reinforcing India's readiness for design-led chip production.

The competition witnessed participation from 911 teams across 359 colleges, resulting in 532 idea submissions. Following multiple evaluation stages, including mentorship and technical assessments by experts from GlobalFoundries and NXP, 10 finalist teams competed at the grand finale during the IESA Vision Summit 2026.

Speaking at the event, Ashok Chandak, President of IESA and SEMI India, said India's semiconductor ecosystem is at a decisive inflection point.

"While the India Semiconductor Mission is unlocking unprecedented investments, the true multiplier lies in talent and deep-tech innovation. This hackathon showcases the depth of India's semiconductor capability and the power of young engineers to solve complex challenges," he said.

Chandak also emphasised the convergence of AI and semiconductor technologies, stating that next-generation chip development must align with responsible and human-centric AI principles.

Jitendra Chaddah, Vice President and India Country Head of Global-

Foundries, said the hackathon provided a strong platform for students to apply semiconductor design, manufacturing and AI techniques to real-world challenges.

He noted that the initiative supports building a robust semiconductor ecosystem in India through industry-academia collaboration.

Hitesh Garg, Vice President and India Managing Director of NXP Semiconductors, described the hackathon as timely, given India's accelerating ambitions in semiconductors and artificial intelligence.

He said the challenge mirrored modern intelligent manufacturing demands by integrating defect detection, Edge AI and real fab-level problem solving, highlighting the growing need for system design engineers capable of combining hardware, software and AI into scalable solutions.

Organisers said the DeepTech Hackathon reflects a broader push to build a future-ready talent pipeline, stimulate intellectual property creation and strengthen India's position in the global semiconductor and AI landscape.

## FM meets AIIB President, urges her to scale up investment

**NEW DELHI, March 2:** Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Monday met new President of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Zou Jiayi, and underscored the need to scale up investments in member countries.

Both leaders discussed strengthening the India-AIIB partnership, the finance ministry said in a post on X.

Representing the second largest shareholder in AIIB, Sitharaman emphasised the need to scale up investments in AIIB member countries, particularly low-income countries, through various innovative financing and non-financing instruments.

India is the second-largest shareholder in AIIB with 8.5 per cent after China, whose holding is 30.5 per cent.

The Finance Minister also highlighted India's continued focus on infrastructure-led growth under the Union Budget, and both discussed the importance of enhanced collaboration with AIIB through early upstream services in the infrastructure sector in India.

Among other issues, she stressed AIIB's role in developing the capital markets, expediting the approvals of projects in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, and setting up a regional office in India, given the scale of AIIB's operations here. (PTI)

## Industrial output growth slows to 3-month low of 4.8 pc in Jan

**NEW DELHI, March 2:** India's industrial production growth decelerated to a three-month low of 4.8 per cent in January, pulled down by subdued performance in the mining and manufacturing sectors, according to official data released on Monday. The factory output, measured in terms of the Index of Industrial Production (IIP), expanded by 5.2 per cent in January 2025.

The previous low was witnessed in October 2025 at 0.5 per cent growth. The IIP growth was 7.2 per cent in November 2025, an official statement said. (PTI)

## Stock markets suffer major meltdown as West Asia crisis intensifies

**MUMBAI, March 2:** Stock market benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty nosedived over 1 per cent on Monday as investors' sentiment were hit hard following a sharp spike in crude oil prices amid escalating tensions in West Asia. Weak trends in global markets and heavy foreign fund outflows also dented sentiments.

The 30-share BSE Sensex tanked 2,743.46 points or 3.37 per cent to 78,543.73 in early trade. It later ended at 80,238.85, down 1,048.34 points or 1.29 per cent.

The 50-share NSE Nifty tumbled 575.15 points or 2.28 per cent to 24,603.50 in intra-day trade. The benchmark later settled 312.95 points or 1.24 per cent down at 24,865.70. From the Sensex pack, InterGlobe Aviation, Larsen & Toubro, Adani Ports, Maruti, Asian Paints, and Bajaj Finserv were among the biggest laggards. Bharat Electronics, Sun Pharma and ITC were the only gainers. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, jumped 8.34 per cent to USD 78.95 per barrel.

"Indian equity markets closed with a bearish undertone after opening sharply lower in response to the deepening military conflict across the Middle East, which pushed crude oil prices markedly higher," Ponnudi R. CEO of Enrich Money, an online trading and wealth tech firm, said. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was killed in a coordinated US-Israeli airstrike on Tehran early Saturday, with the Iranian state media confirming the death on Sunday. Iran began firing missiles at Israel and the Arab countries in the region in retaliation for the killing of its supreme leader.

The BSE smallcap select index tanked 1.81 per cent and midcap select index dropped 1.67 per cent.

Among sectoral indices, services tumbled 3.81 per cent, consumer durables (2.30 per cent), auto (2.23 per cent), consumer discretionary (2.16 per cent), oil & gas (2.15 per cent), industrials (2.14 per cent) and energy (2.06 per cent). (PTI)

## OTT platforms line up special releases for Holi weekend binge

**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, March 2:** With Holi around the corner, OTT platforms have rolled out a fresh slate of films and series, offering viewers a wide range of options for the festive long weekend.

Telecom service provider Bharti Airtel has also highlighted its Airtel IPTV service, which aggregates more than 29 OTT applications, over 600 live TV channels and an extensive on-demand content library, positioning it as a single-window entertainment solution for viewers during the festive break.

Among the prominent new releases this week is Secret Stories: Roslin on JioHotstar, a Malayalam psychological thriller that explores paranoia and trauma through the story of a teenager haunted by recurring nightmares.

The series blends suspense with psychological drama, making it a notable addition for thriller enthusiasts.

On Apple TV+, Monarch:

Legacy of Monsters - Season 2 continues the Titan saga, expanding its narrative with larger-scale conflicts and returning iconic creatures.

The series builds on the established universe with heightened action and visual spectacle.

Netflix has released Accused, a psychological drama starring Konkona Sen Sharma, which examines the fallout of misconduct allegations on a respected medical professional.

The show delves into themes of public scrutiny, reputation and personal relationships. Meanwhile, ZEE5's Tamil crime thriller Thadavim follows a sub-inspector investigating ritualistic murders along the Tamil Nadu-Andhra Pradesh border, offering a tense investigative narrative.

In addition to fresh releases, new episodes of popular international titles are also drawing attention. Netflix's Bridgerton - Season 4, Part 2 continues its romantic

drama, while Prime Video features The Bluff, starring Priyanka Chopra Jonas in an action-driven storyline about confronting a violent past.

Prime Video is also set to premiere Young Sherlock on March 4, presenting a reimagined origin story of the iconic detective in his formative years.

With festive gatherings often followed by relaxed indoor time, industry observers note that Holi has increasingly become a key window for streaming platforms to release high-profile content.

Aggregated IPTV services, offering bundled access to multiple streaming apps, are also witnessing heightened interest during extended holiday weekends.

As viewers balance celebrations with leisure time, the festival of colours is expected to bring a corresponding surge in digital viewership across genres ranging from thrillers and crime dramas to romance and fantasy.

Contd. from Page 3...

## Garima rues SIT's

government, the SPP said it is a matter between the government and the Gauhati High Court. He maintained that it will definitely expedite the hearing process, though "legal procedures cannot be curtailed". "The accused also have their rights. They might file petitions (before the fast-track court), we might also have to file petitions," Kamar added. Garima also hoped that setting up a fast-track court will expedite the case, though she was not aware of progress in the matter.

The celebrated singer had died on September 19 last year while swimming in the sea in Singapore, where he had gone to attend the 4th edition of the North East India Festival (NEIF).

A Special Investigation Team (SIT) of the state police's CID probed the case and submitted the charge-sheet in December, which included murder charges against some of the accused.

Besides NEIF chief organiser Shyamkanu Mahanta and Sharma, Garg's two band members Shekhar Jyoti Goswami and Amrit Prabha Mahanta, his cousin and now-suspended Assam Police DSP Sandipan Garg, and his PSOs Nandeswar Bora and Prabin Baishya are in jail as accused in the case.

The state cabinet had earlier appointed a five-member team of Special Public Prosecutors (PP) with senior advocate Ziaul Kamar to lead it. It had named Brojendra Mohan Chaudhuri as additional PP, and Kishor Dutta, Pranjal Dutta and Vikash Jammur as assistant PPs.

Ruling out any foul play, a Coroner's Court in Singapore had said that the popular Indian singer-songwriter was severely intoxicated and had drowned off Lazarus Island after declining a life jacket. (PTI)

## Himanta covers four

empowered future", he added. The 'Jan Ashirwad Yatra' is aimed to take the party's vision, achievements and organisational goals to the people ahead of the forthcoming Assembly elections.

The Yatra's first phase, concluding on March 9, will cover 34 Assembly constituencies.

The CM began the Yatra on February 28 from Dhekiajuli in Sonitpur district ahead of the Assembly polls with the BJP aiming for a third consecutive victory. (PTI)

## Gaurav 'not a

leaders have maintained that personal attacks on religion and ancestry are aimed at diverting attention from governance-related concerns. Political observers note that identity politics has once again taken centre stage in Assam's discourse, with leaders from rival parties trading sharp remarks as electoral activity intensifies. The controversy is likely to further heat up the political climate in the coming days.

## Oil prices surge

per cent of the world's oil supply passes. Tanker traffic dropped sharply amid disruption of satellite navigation systems, data and analytics firm Kpler said on X, while the UK Maritime Trade Operations Centre reported attacks on several vessels in the area on either side of the strait and warned of elevated electronic interference to systems that show where ships are. A bomb-carrying drone boat struck a Marshall Islands-flagged oil tanker in the Gulf of Oman on Monday, killing one mariner on board, Oman said. Iran has been threatening vessels approaching the Strait of Hormuz and is believed to have launched multiple attacks.

Saudi authorities reported they intercepted Iranian drones that attacked the Ras Tanura oil refinery near Dammam and the refinery was shut down as a precaution, Saudi state television reported. Market attention has focused on whether the conflict would widen to other oil-producing countries in the region.

Monday's price increase was within the USD 5-USD 10 per barrel range expected by analysts based simply on the fear factor associated with the outbreak of war. And some war concerns were already reflected in the price before the conflict started. However, long-term disruption to ship traffic in the strait could send prices even higher, and so could damage to oil infrastructure in other Gulf countries. Meanwhile, a shorter conflict in which disruptions are easily reversible could mean the current price spike won't last. (AP)

## Iran expands attacks

and demanded the group hand over its weapons. Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam said only the state can decide whether to go to war or peace, and called on the Lebanese military to prevent the firing of projectiles and detain anyone involved. In Kuwait, fire and smoke rose from inside the US Embassy compound.

On Monday afternoon, multiple airstrikes hit Tehran, Iran's capital, while top Iranian security official Ali Larjani vowed on X that "we will not negotiate with the United States."

In Iraq, a pro-Iranian militia claimed responsibility for a drone attack targeting US troops at the Baghdad airport, the day after it said it fired at a US base in the city of Irbil in the north, and Cyprus said a drone attack targeted a British base on the Mediterranean island nation. Israel and the US bombed Iranian missile sites and targeted its navy, claiming to have destroyed its headquarters and multiple warships.

**Iran expands attacks to regional oil infrastructure:** World markets were rattled by the fighting, and oil prices soared. Saudi Arabia's Ras Tanura oil refinery came under a drone attack on Monday, with defences downing the incoming aircraft, a military spokesman told the state-run Saudi Press Agency.

Online videos from the site appeared to show thick black smoke rising after the attack. Even successfully intercepted drones cause debris that can spark fires and injure those on the ground.

Ras Tanura, near the city of Dammam in eastern Saudi Arabia, is one of the world's largest oil refineries with a capacity of over half a million barrels of crude oil a day. It was temporarily shut down as a precaution after the attack, Saudi state television reported. Oman said a bomb-carrying drone boat exploded against a Marshall Islands-flagged oil tanker in the Gulf of Oman on Monday, off the coast of the sultanate's capital of Muscat, killing one mariner. The state-run Oman News Agency said the dead crew member was from India. Earlier in the day, debris fell on Kuwait's Ahmadi oil refinery, injuring two workers, after drones were shot down, the state-run KUNA news agency reported.

Iran's decision to expand its attacks to major regional oil infrastructure adds a new element to the war gripping the Middle East, directly targeting the lifeblood of the area's economy.

"The attack on Saudi Arabia's Ras Tanura refinery marks a significant escalation, with Gulf energy infrastructure now squarely in Iran's sights," said Torbjorn Soltvedt, an analyst at the risk intelligence company Verisk Maplecroft.

"An extended period of uncertainty lies ahead as Iran seeks to impose a heavy economic cost by putting tankers, regional energy infrastructure, trade routes and US security partners in the crosshairs," he added.

Iran has also threatened ships in the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf through which a fifth of all oil traded passes. Several ships have been attacked as well. (AP)

## 13 km roads

of positioning Assam as a gateway to the Northeast and a key component of India's Act East policy.

Sarma reiterated that sustained investment in infrastructure would remain a priority, stating that improved connectivity is essential for inclusive growth and long-term economic transformation of the state.

## First consignment of

dynamic leadership of Hon'ble CM Dr. @himantabiswa, the first-ever GI-tagged Karbi Anglong Ginger consignment has been exported from Assam to London," the Chief Minister's Office (CMO) said in a post on X.

"This milestone, facilitated by APEDA, highlights Assam's growing global agri footprint and ensures better returns for our hardworking farmers. From the fertile farms of Assam to international markets, the world is embracing Assamese products with great enthusiasm and appreciation," it added.

APEDA General Manager Vineeta Sudhanshu said this is the first time ginger from Assam is being exported to London.

"In January, we organised an international buyer-seller meet. The buyers liked our products there and showed interest in purchasing them," Sudhanshu said. (PTI)

## 'Special Court conducted

contended. The central probe agency went on to allege that the observations in the order bear testimony to the fact that the Special Judge "lacks the basic understanding of the prosecution case as a whole and the corresponding law at the stage of charge". It said the conspiracy revolves around the facts which individually "may not be per se indicative" of the role played by various accused. However, when the actions of the accused are taken cumulatively, the conspiracy to monetise the Policy (excise policy) becomes clear, the agency said.

"However, the Ld. Special Judge has completely ignored the basis of the conspiracy but has evaluated in detail small contradictions which is not even the case as laid out by the prosecution. In effect, the Ld. Special Judge has formulated his own understanding of the individual roles of the accused in a completely different perspective," it said. The CBI alleged that, in substance, a case of rampant corruption, emanating from the highest levels of executive, has resulted in a discharge owing to incorrect conclusions being drawn to impute aspersions on the investigating agency, when the record of the case, which is to be treated as uncontroverted at this stage, speaks otherwise. (PTI)

## Cong reviews grassroots

visit every household, listen to public grievances and highlight what he termed as the "failures of the present government and its anti-people policies."

Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) general secretary Subhramitra Gogoi, addressing the gathering, said elections are not merely about coming to power but about safeguarding the rights of common people.

He expressed confidence that victory would be achievable if party workers functioned in a disciplined and organised manner across every booth. Earlier, Jorhat district general secretary (administration) Indrajit Pegu outlined the objectives of the meeting and emphasised coordinated efforts ahead of the polls.

It may be noted that of the four Legislative Assembly Constituencies (LACs) in Jorhat district, Jorhat and Mariani are currently represented by the BJP, Teok by its alliance partner Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), while Titabar is held by the Congress.

## Assam emerging as

proximity to Southeast Asian markets, has enhanced its appeal as an investment destination.

The state government has also prioritised skill development and employment generation to ensure that industrial growth translates into broader economic benefits. New projects across sectors are expected to create significant job opportunities for local youth. Sarma reiterated that industrialisation would remain central to Assam's economic transformation, enabling diversification of the revenue base while contributing to national growth objectives.

## Army, other security

played a pivotal role in target detection and fire correction, with helicopters of Army Aviation also engaged in the exercise. The joint training significantly enhanced operational preparedness and collective capability to respond effectively to emerging security challenges, it said.

The exercise also validated robust framework for integrated surveillance, firepower employment and mutual confidence amongst the Indian Army and paramilitary forces, the statement added. (PTI)

## Book revisit India's

of 'Zero'. Written in a contemporary, accessible voice and supported by rich illustrations, the illustrated book, according to the publisher Penguin Random House India (PRHI), is designed to appeal equally to curious middle-grade readers and parents and teachers seeking engaging supplementary history reading.

"Packed with cool trivia, bright illustrations and a fun, playful design, this is the ultimate history book -- without any of the boring stuff. Prepare to jump and shout, 'I never knew that!' again and again!" they added. "A to Z of Indian History", priced at Rs 599, is available for purchase across online and offline stores. (PTI)

**RELIABILITY IMPROVEMENT OF SIGNALING ASSETS**  
E-Tender No.: SNT-44-LMG-2025-26  
Date: 26-02-2026. E-Tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following works: **Name of work:** Reliability improvement by means of repairs, restoration/maintenance of signaling assets under the jurisdiction of SSE/Sig/Dimapur/IC.  
**Tender Value:** ₹1,82,10,063.94/-  
**Bid Security:** ₹2,41,100/-  
**Date & time of closing of tender:** At 15:00 hrs. & opening on 15:30 hrs. on 20-03-2026. The complete information with the tender document of above e-tender will be available on website [www.irps.gov.in](http://www.irps.gov.in)  
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# THE HILLS TIMES

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TUESDAY, MARCH 3, 2026

THE HILLS TIMES 3

## Zubeen case: Court de-freezes one of accused's account over 'technical lapse' • Next hearing on March 19

### Garima rues SIT's 'procedural lapse'

**GUWAHATI, March 2:** A court here on Monday ordered the de-freezing of the bank account of an accused in the Zubeen Garg death case over "technical lapses", while fixing March 19 for consideration of charge hearing, the special public prosecutor (SPP) in the case said.

The Kamrup Metropolitan District and Sessions Court, which is hearing the case, also rejected a petition by another accused seeking report of the Singapore Police, he said.

SPP Ziaul Kamar, briefing reporters, said, "The honourable court has set March 19 for consideration of charge hearing. After that, the trial will begin."

He asserted that the prosecution, which leads the charge hearing, will be ready for it, though he could not comment on behalf of the accused.

"I don't know what the accused will do, what petition they may file," Kamar, who had earlier



charged the accused of adopting delaying tactics by submitting different petitions, added.

He said the court has ordered to de-freeze the bank account of one of the accused, Shyamkanu Mahanta, for "technical reasons".

Garg's wife, Garima Saikia Garg, who was present at the hearing along with the celebrated

Sharma, seeking a copy of Singapore Police's report in Garg's case.

"The court said that the Assam Police has already acquired all the details and it can be accessed by the accused for further examination on March 10 to 12, from 2 pm to 4 pm," he said.

On Sharma seeking de-attachment of his flat in Guwahati, Kamar said the court has ordered that it may be opened if Sharma provides a bank surety of Rs 16 lakh to the police.

Sharma, Garg's manager, is accused of using an amount of Rs 16 lakh embezzled from the singer while purchasing the flat.

A separate case concerning a packaged drinking water company, Mahabir Aqua, of which Sharma is a co-owner, will also be taken up by the same court on March 19, Kamar added.

Asked about any progress in setting up the fast-track court to take forward the case as announced by the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## BJP'S JAN ASHIRWAD YATRA

### Himanta covers four constituencies on Day-3



**GUWAHATI, March 2:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday covered four assembly constituencies -- Gohpur, Bihpuria, Ranganadi and Bihpuria -- on the third day of BJP's Jan Ashirwad Yatra, ahead of the state elections.

Sarma was greeted along the route by people from all walks of life, with women, elderly residents, and differently abled persons prominently present on the roadside.

The CM, accompanied by party leaders and legislators, greeted the crowd from atop a truck and, in some places, alighted to personally meet the elderly and disabled.

"Gohpur was nothing short of grand. Progress is taking shape across the constituency, but the overwhelming energy today was something special. Your warmth and trust give this journey its true strength",

Sarma posted on 'X'.

He said the immense affection and blessings received from people in Gohpur were invaluable.

"This support is a testament to the unwavering faith of the people in the development policies of the esteemed @narendramodiji", Sarma added.

The CM said that he was committed to the progress of every family in the state, and with the immense love and blessings from the people, a new Assam will be built.

"Every village, every street is being touched and passed by on the path of development. In this journey of development, children, youth, and the elderly are all blessing us. Together with all, development for all, trust of all, and effort of all," he said.

Across the 12 constituencies, "I have covered till now in the #JanaAshirwadYatra, the feedback from the people has been unanimous - Once again, a BJP government".

"In Bihpuria, I felt both pride and responsibility," he said.

"The progress is visible on the ground, and today's energy makes one thing clear: we cannot slow down now," he added.

Sarma said that people coming to greet him is not just a gathering but a "shared heartbeat. Your trust and faith mean everything to me. The love is truly overwhelming. I am deeply grateful from the bottom of my heart for this affection and blessing," he said.

"I am fully committed with utmost dedication to your honour, safety, and (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

### 13 km roads built daily in Assam since 2021, says Himanta

**GUWAHATI, March 2:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday said Assam has made significant progress in strengthening connectivity infrastructure, claiming that the state is "acing the connectivity game" in both speed and scale.

In a post on social media platform X, Sarma stated that since 2021, the state government has constructed an average of 13 kilometres of roads each day and five bridges every week.

"Since 2021, we have built 13 km of roads each day and 5 bridges every week, bringing people closer and opening up opportunities for all," the chief minister wrote.

Highlighting connectivity as a cornerstone of development, Sarma described it as the foundation of what he termed an "Atal, Avichal, Agragami Assam," referring to a vision of a strong, stable and forward-moving state.

The chief minister has repeatedly underscored infrastructure development as a key priority of his government, with emphasis on expanding road, bridge and transport networks to improve access to remote and border areas.

Officials said that enhanced connectivity has reduced travel time and improved access to healthcare, education, markets and government services, particularly in rural and flood-prone regions.

The expansion of road networks and bridges has also contributed to boosting trade, tourism and investment. Major initiatives in recent years include construction of new highways, strengthening of rural roads and completion of several long-pending bridge projects over the Brahmaputra and its tributaries.

The state's connectivity drive has also been aligned with national infrastructure programmes, with the aim (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Iran expands attacks to regional oil infra

### War widens to include Iranian-backed militias as Israeli, American planes pound Iran

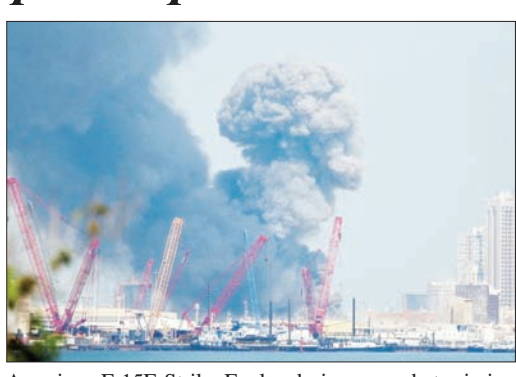
**DUBAI, March 2:** Iran and allied armed groups fired missiles at Israel, Arab states and US military targets around the region on Monday, while Israel and the United States pounded Iran as the war expanded to several fronts. Kuwait mistakenly shot down three American warplanes over its skies.

The intensity of the attacks on both sides, the killing of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the lack of any apparent exit plan indicated the conflict would not end any time soon. It already has far-reaching consequences across the region and beyond: Previously safe havens in the Mideast like Dubai have seen incoming fire; hundreds of thousands of airline passengers are stranded around the globe; oil prices shot up; and US allies pledged to help stop Iranian missiles and drones.

If attacked, Iran has long threatened to drag the region into total war, including targeting Israel, the Gulf Arab states and the flow of crude oil crucial for global energy markets. All these things came under attack on Monday.

QatarEnergy, in fact, said it would stop its production of liquefied natural gas because of the conflict, taking one of the world's top suppliers off the market. It offered no timeline for restoring its production.

The chaos of the conflict became apparent when the US military said Kuwait had "mistakenly shot down" three



American F-15E Strike Eagles during a combat mission while attacks from Iranian aircraft, ballistic missiles, and drones were underway. US Central Command said all six pilots ejected safely and are in stable condition.

At least 555 people have been killed in Iran so far by the US-Israeli campaign, the Iranian Red Crescent Society said, and more than 130 cities across the country have come under attack. Eleven people have been killed in Israel and 31 in Lebanon, according to authorities there.

Lebanon's government said Hezbollah's overnight attack against Israel was "illegal" (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

### Oil prices surge as Strait of Hormuz tanker disruptions rattle global supply

**FRANKFURT (GERMANY), March 2:** Oil prices rose sharply Monday as disruptions in tanker traffic through the Strait of Hormuz chokepoint raised uncertainty about how US and Israeli attacks on Iran would affect supply to the world economy.

US oil traded 7.4 per cent higher at USD 71.97 per barrel, while international standard Brent was up 7.7 per cent at USD 78.46 per barrel.

Higher oil prices raise the prospect of costlier gasoline prices for US drivers as well as for other goods at a time when people in many countries have been stung by inflation.

A key focus was the situation around the strait at the southern end of the Persian Gulf, through which 20 (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Gaurav 'not a true Ahom': Margherita

**GUWAHATI, March 2:** Union Minister of State for External Affairs Pabitra Margherita on Monday launched a sharp attack on Assam Congress leader Gaurav Gogoi, questioning his lineage, religious outlook and political positioning, setting off a fresh round of political sparring in the state.

Addressing reporters in Guwahati, Margherita alleged that Gogoi was "not a true Ahom" and claimed that three members of his family were foreigners.

He further accused the Congress leader of harbouring contempt towards Hinduism and alleged that such sentiments had influenced his personal choices.

The remarks come amid heightened political debates ahead of upcoming electoral contests in Assam.

The Union minister asserted

that issues of identity, culture and faith cannot be separated from public life and said the people of Assam were aware of what he described as the "real background" of certain Congress leaders.

He alleged that some political figures were attempting to mislead voters while distancing themselves from the state's traditional values.

Margherita also accused the Congress of politicising identity issues without addressing the aspirations of indigenous communities.

He said the electorate was increasingly seeking clarity and accountability from political representatives.

The Congress has strongly refuted such allegations in the past, terming similar remarks as politically motivated and divisive. Party (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## First consignment of GI-tagged ginger exported from Assam

**GUWAHATI, March 2:** The first consignment of Assam's GI-tagged ginger from Karbi Anglong district to London was flagged off by Agriculture Minister Atul Bora on Monday.

The export of 1.2 metric tonnes of ginger was facilitated by the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) in collaboration with the state agricultural department.

Bora said that this was a "historic leap" for Assam's farmers and agricultural pride, as it shows growing global recognition of the state's high-quality agricultural commodities.

"The export of ginger highlights the government's focus on increas-



ing farmers' income, promoting value addition and strengthening global market linkages," Bora said.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's initiatives have helped expand the state's presence in international agricultural markets, the minister said. "Now people in London will find Assam's finest ginger at their doorsteps! Under the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## 'Special Court conducted mini-trial, misread facts'

### CBI on order discharging Kejriwal, others in excise case

**NEW DELHI, March 2:** Challenging the special court order discharging former Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and others in the excise policy case, the CBI has submitted to the Delhi High Court that the order was based "on a selective reading of the prosecution case, disregarding the material showing the culpability of the accused", and was "patently illegal".

In its 974-page petition before the high court, the CBI said the Special Judge essentially conducted a mini-trial and "spent 4 months' time reading only the file of the case", which shows appreciation of the evidence by the judge which "otherwise is not permitted at this stage".

The special judge dealt with separate limbs of conspiracy in isola-

tion rather than assessing the actions of the accused cumulatively, the agency also said.

Termining the order "perverse", the agency said it suffers from "errors apparent on the face", is based on "misreading" of facts and violates the Supreme Court's assertions related to the stage when charges are to be framed.

The special court had on Friday discharged Kejriwal, Sisodia and 21 others in the liquor-policy case by refusing to take cognisance of the CBI chargesheet against them.

Among the 21 people given a clean chit in the case is Telangana Jagruthi president K Kavitha.

Special Judge Jitendra Singh had rejected the CBI for lapses in the investigation, saying there was no co-

gent evidence against Kejriwal and no prima facie case against Sisodia and the other accused.

Within hours, the CBI had approached the high court challenging the order through an urgent revision petition. The hearing in the case will take place on March 9.

"The Impugned Order is patently illegal, perverse and suffers from errors apparent on the face. Not only does it fail to appreciate the facts of the case in its correct perspective, such failure on the part of the Ld. Special Judge has further led to passing of adverse remarks against the investigating agency, as well as the investigating officer, all of which are unwarranted and incomprehensible, to say the least," the CBI (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Cong reviews grassroots strategy in Jorhat

**JORHAT, March 2:** The Jorhat district unit of the Indian National Congress (INC) on Monday held an extended executive meeting at Congress Bhawan as part of preparations for the forthcoming Assam Assembly elections.

The meeting, presided over by Jorhat district INC president Putal Buragohain, was attended by mandal and booth-level leaders, along with members of the district executive committee.

Reviewing the party's organisational activities, Buragohain stressed the need to further strengthen the grassroots base and intensify outreach at the booth level.

He urged party workers and supporters to (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## 'A to Z of Indian History'

### Book revisit India's history with lesser-known stories

**NEW DELHI, March 2:** From emperors to edibles, fossils to folklore, a new history book for young readers traces the past by exploring it through food, inventions, language and everyday practices.

Breaking away from a focus on dates, dynasties and exam syllabi, "A to Z of Indian History" compiles 80 stories from across the country, stretching back thousands of years.

It is co-written by bestselling authors Archana Garodia Gupta and Shruti Garodia.

"This collection brings together 80 stories from across India, spanning thousands of years. It covers a wide range of subjects including food, travellers, animals, monuments, and more.

"They stretch across millennia, from dinosaurs to current times, and move beyond India's borders



to explore Indians abroad as well as Indian influences around the world," read the authors' note in the book.

Among its many intriguing tid-

bits are the unearthing of some of the world's earliest dinosaur fossils in Madhya Pradesh; and the revelation that India's first stunt heroine, Fearless Nadia -- popularly known as 'Hunterwali' -- was in fact Australian actress Mary Evans. It also notes that there are over 300 versions of the Hindu epic Ramayana.

Another chapter recounts how Babur, founder of the Mughal Empire, never quite understood India's obsession with mangoes, preferring instead the melons of Uzbekistan.

"This collection brings together 80 stories from across India, spanning thousands of years. It covers a wide range of subjects including food, travellers, animals, monuments, and more.

Each short, engaging entry pairs a lively anecdote with a fun fact, spotlighting lesser-known episodes and unexpected connections that rarely make it to school textbooks -- from the Ajanta Caves to the concept (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

### Army, other security agencies conduct joint firing exercise in Assam

**GUWAHATI, March 2:** The Indian Army conducted a joint artillery firing exercise in collaboration with other security agencies in Assam's Tamulpur district, an official statement said on Monday. The Spearhead Gunners conducted the exercise along with the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), Assam Rifles and Army Aviation at Darranga in Tamulpur on Sunday, it said.

The exercise showcased integrated employment of advanced surveillance resources, reconnaissance and surveillance flights and coordinated operations with Mortar Fire Controllers of Infantry, ITBP and Assam Rifles.

"It focused on enhancing real-time battle-field awareness, precision target acquisition and swift engagement capabilities in challenging terrain conditions," the statement said.

Surveillance assets and recon flights (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Assam emerging as fast-expanding industrial hub: Himanta

**GUWAHATI, March 2:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday said Assam has evolved into a rapidly expanding industrial hub, moving beyond its traditional identity as a tea-producing state.

In a post on social media platform X, Sarma said that while Assam continues to be a leading tea producer, its industrial base has diversified significantly in recent years, covering sectors such as semiconductors, hydrocarbons, manufacturing, hospitality and allied industries.

"You thought Assam just produces tea? Well, it does that but today our industrial base has expanded -- from semiconductor to hydrocarbons, manufacturing to hospitality and beyond," the chief minister wrote.

Referring to the state's industrial vision under the "Advantage Assam" banner, Sarma asserted that

Assam is positioning itself as one of India's emerging industrial centres.

"#AdvantageAssam is India's emerging industrial hub and we have just begun," he added.

The chief minister said the government has introduced several reforms to improve the ease of doing business, attract private investment and strengthen industrial infrastructure.

These measures include the development of industrial parks, sector-specific policies and incentive schemes for domestic and international investors.

Officials noted that recent investment summits and roadshows have generated renewed interest in Assam's potential across sectors such as energy, electronics, food processing, tourism and logistics.

They added that Assam's strategic location in the Northeast, coupled with improved connectivity and (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

# The Significance of DouL Festival in Assamese Social Life

By: Himaneshu Ranjan Bhuvan

In the spiritual and social life of Assam, the significance of Fakua or DouL Utsav is immense. It is not merely a seasonal festival; rather, it is a noble occasion of inner purity and spiritual awakening of human souls. The core philosophy of this festival is to remove jealousy, hatred, and narrowness from the human mind and to build an egalitarian society. In Assamese society, the importance of this festival is so profound that through it an exceptional dimension of our national culture is expressed. Immersing in the ocean of love and devotion of Lord Krishna, people forget all differences and celebrate together, which is the finest aspect of this festival. The colors of Fakua remind us that to keep life joyful and illuminated, we must remove the darkness of ignorance within us. This sacred festival teaches us morality and builds a bond of brotherhood among every individual in society. From a spiritual perspective, DouL Utsav inspires us to renounce worldly attachments and surrender at the feet of the Supreme Lord. The cultural unity formed through it has kept our society united even today.

The legend of the devotee Prahlada associated with Fakua or Holi conveys the eternal message of the victory of righteousness over unrighteousness. Though the son of the arrogant demon king Hiranyakashipu, Prahlada's unwavering devotion to Lord Vishnu stands as a rare example in human history. For refusing to accept his father as God and constantly chanting the name of Narayana, Prahlada had to endure severe torture. When Holika, who possessed a boon of not being burned by fire, sat in the flames with Prahlada, true devotion protected him while Holika, the symbol of evil, was reduced to ashes. This story reminds us that truth always triumphs and that complete surrender to God enables one to overcome any adversity. Therefore, on the eve of Fakua, through Holika Dahan, a vow is taken to eradicate all evil forces from society. This mythological event instills moral courage within us and inspires us to stand against injustice.

Another mythological narrative links this day of Fakua with the burning of Kamadeva, which teaches restraint and self-control. When Lord Shiva was deeply absorbed in meditation, Kamadeva attempted to disturb his penance, and as a

result of Shiva's wrath, Kamadeva was reduced to ashes. This legend teaches us that to achieve success in life, we must learn to control our desires. Without conquering the senses, one can never progress on the spiritual path. The sanctity of Fakua provides us with the mental strength through which we can shape our character. Thus, this festival is not merely an external play of colors but a process of inner purification. This profound philosophy of life has established Fakua as a great festival. It teaches us that true happiness lies not in external objects but in inner peace and self-control.

If we examine the history of DouL Utsav in Assam, it is found that Srimanta Sankardev initiated its true foundation. The ideals of Neo-Vaishnavism propagated by him gave this festival a distinct dimension. According to the accounts in the Charit Puthi, Sankardev organized DouL Yatra at Bordowa at the age of only 21. He personally carried soil to construct the foundation of the DouL, and at that time, a four-armed Vishnu idol was discovered beneath the earth. Installing this idol on a seven-tiered throne, a grand festival was organized, creating a devotional atmosphere through Gayan-Bayan and Naam-Kirtan. Sankardev desired that people come closer to God through devotion, and therefore he gave DouL Utsav a universal form where there was no place for discrimination. From Bordowa, this tradition later spread throughout the Satriya society of Assam and attained the status of a national festival.

The celebration of DouL Utsav at Barpeta Satra holds a unique grandeur that has secured a special place throughout India. In 1518 Shaka, Mathura Das Burha Ata, the Satradhikar of Barpeta Satra, first introduced DouL Utsav there. The DouL of Barpeta is not merely a festival but an ocean of emotion and devotion for the people of Barpeta. The date of this festival is determined according to a specific rule, based on the full moon of the month of Phagun or Chaitra. Known as Deka DouL and Burha DouL, this festival creates a special spiritual atmosphere through Borgeets and Holi songs composed by Srimanta Madhavdev. Devotees from the 22 Hatis of Barpeta participate with deep sincerity, awakening an extraordinary sense of unity in society. Every ritual performed here carries deep significance, expressing boundless devotion and reverence toward God. During this festival, the entire town of Barpeta transforms



into a Vaikunthapuri, and the air resonates with the chanting of Harinam.

The schedule of each day of DouL Utsav is highly organized, and the first day, known as Gandha Yatra, is of great importance. On this day, the Gosai is brought out from the temple and placed in a sacred spot. The tradition of circling the Gosai seven times around the Meji fire symbolizes the burning away of all jealousy and negative thoughts from the mind. This process spiritually purifies individuals and inspires them to move forward in life with renewed energy. In the sacred light of the Meji fire, devotees experience indescribable spiritual bliss while chanting Naam-Kirtan. From this day, the true fervor of the festival begins, and hearts become drenched in devotion. The sacred fire symbolizes the removal of darkness from society and the promise of a luminous future. It instills new hope in people, strengthening social unity.

The second day, known as Bhar DouL, is marked by the principal religious ceremonies, during which the worship of the Gosai and the chanting of Harinam fill the atmosphere. Devotees offer prayers with deep sincerity and seek blessings for their well-being. The gathering in the

Satra courtyard resembles a vast ocean of devotion. The sounds of the Khol and Taal played by Gayan-Bayan create a unique ecstasy, making people forget worldly sorrows. Through the praise of Lord Krishna, devotees attain spiritual satisfaction possible only through sincere practice. The intimate bond between God and devotee becomes clearer on this sacred day. Human virtues flourish, and people learn to surrender completely at the feet of the Lord. This spiritual experience broadens the mind and removes narrowness.

Suweri, or Souri, is the final and most joyous day of DouL Utsav, when the festival attains its complete form. On this day, devotees smear Fakuguri on one another and immerse themselves in joy, fostering a spirit of brotherhood. The colors of Abir erase all distinctions of caste and religion, identifying everyone simply as human. The 'Banh Bhang' ceremony of Barpeta's Suweri is a particularly intriguing event, creating a dramatic situation concerning Lord Krishna's entry into the temple. This tradition reflects the human aspect of God and His connection with human emotions. On this day, the entire region assumes the form of a grand cele-

bration, with people forgetting all divisions. As the Gosai is taken back into the temple at the end of Suweri, devotees feel a sense of separation, yet also hope for reunion in the coming year. These emotional moments reflect the tender dimension of our national character.

An essential part of Fakua or DouL Utsav is the Holi songs, which have enriched our folk culture. These songs beautifully depict the various divine plays of Lord Krishna and the longing of devotees' hearts. In the Satriya tradition of Barpeta, these songs hold a special place, and their melodies captivate any listener. When hundreds of devotees sing together in the Naamghar and Satra courtyard, a profound unity is created, dissolving social divisions. The words used in these songs are simple and touching, enabling common people to grasp their meaning easily. It is a beautiful and accessible medium of attaining closeness to God through devotion. Through these songs, our language and musical traditions are nurtured, strengthening our national identity. The wisdom and devotion of our ancestors continue to flow through them.

In fostering social harmony and unity, Fakua Utsav's contribution is truly un-

paralleled. There is no discrimination of high or low here. When people of different communities color each other with Abir, a heavenly atmosphere is created. This festival teaches us that the red blood flowing in all humans is the same and that divisions among us are man-made. For maintaining peace and order in society, such collective festivals are essential, as they broaden the human mind. The friendship and mutual affection fostered through Fakua help create a healthy social environment. It strengthens mutual trust and respect, which are the foundation of a happy society. In today's turbulent times, the relevance of Fakua's noble message has grown even more. It teaches us to show empathy and respect toward one another.

In the past, the colors used during Fakua were entirely natural, derived from various plants. These natural colors were not only beautiful but also harmless to the human body. To preserve our ancient traditions and culture, we must maintain their purity and authenticity. It is our moral responsibility to ensure that in the name of celebration we do not harm ourselves or the environment. By using natural materials, we can elevate the dignity of this festival. It reflects our respect for tradition and our sense of responsibility toward nature. Although many changes have occurred in modern times, our connection with our roots should always remain intact. Through this, we can cultivate a healthy and beautiful culture that guides future generations.

Though the methods of celebrating DouL Utsav vary slightly across different Satras of Assam, the underlying purpose remains the same. The grand manner in which it is celebrated in the Satras of Majuli reflects the vastness of our Satriya culture. The DouL Utsav at Hajo's Madhav Temple also has an ancient history and deep faith among devotees. In all these places, it is evident how people seek to dedicate themselves through devotion. These festivals are the backbone of our national life, through which we can pass our heritage to future generations. Every moment of DouL Utsav teaches us that offering devotion at the feet of God is the supreme joy of life. Through it, our society remains illuminated with spiritual light. This sacred tradition further strengthens our social bonds. (The author is the recipient of the 'Yuba Lekhak Sanman - 2025' from the Government of Assam)

## The spiritual glory of spring and DouL Yatra

By: Lalit Nath

Spring, the king of seasons, occupies a cherished place in Assamese life. After the dryness and stillness of winter, the arrival of spring in the months of Phagun and Chot transforms nature into a vibrant canvas. Tender buds bloom on trees and creepers, while flowers like palash, shimul and krishnachura spread their fiery hues across the landscape. This seasonal renewal is not merely a change in nature's attire, it awakens love, hope and spiritual longing within the human heart. Amid this enchanting atmosphere, the festival of DouL Yatra—popularly known as Fakuwa—is celebrated with devotion and joy.

The scriptural foundation of DouL Yatra can be traced to the Brahma Vaivarta Purana, particularly in the Krishna Janma Khand, where the celebration of Dolotsava on the full moon of Phalgun is mentioned:

"Phalguni Purima tasya vatsaryena hi kirtita, Tasyam dolotsavam kritva gayanti cha namanti cha."

The verse clearly speaks of DouL Purnima, devotional singing and reverential worship. According to this tradition, on the auspicious full moon day, the idols of Lord Krishna and Radha are placed upon a swing and taken out in procession amid kirtan and prayer.

Though known by various names—DouL, DouL, DouL Yatra, Fakuwa, Phalgutsava, or Basantotsava—the festival is essentially pan Indian in character. It is celebrated with great enthusiasm in states such as Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and West Bengal. In Assam, however, the festival assumes a distinctive spiritual and cultural identity shaped by the Neo Vaishnavite movement.

Ancient texts like the Kalika Purana and Yogini Tantra refer to the observance of Madan Chaturdash. In early Assam, the festival was once associated with fertility rites during the full moon of Phagun. Under the spiritual guidance of Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva, however, it underwent a profound transformation and emerged as a deeply devotional celebration rooted in bhakti.

According to Guru Charitra by Ramcharan Thakur, around 1470 CE, when Sankardeva was about twenty one

years old, he initiated the DouL festival at his birthplace Bordowa. Tradition recounts that while preparing the foundation of the DouL platform, Sankardeva himself carried earth in a copper tray. During excavation, a Vishnu idol was discovered, which later came to be worshipped as DouL Govinda. Installing the idol on a seven tiered seat, he began observing DouL Yatra on the full moon of Phagun with Naam Kirtan and the use of natural colours. It is said that Sankardeva sent his disciple Balaram Ata to Maruapara to collect natural colour powder. After ten days, Balaram returned with seven pitchers of naturally prepared colours. Thus began a tradition that beautifully combined devotion with festivity.

Due to political unrest, Sankardeva was compelled to leave Bordowa around 1516-17. Later, at Barpeta Satra, Mathura Das Burha Ata institutionalized and organized the festival around 1596 CE. In Barpeta, the festival is popularly called DouL. Today, Barpeta Satra stands as one of the principal centers of Assamese Vaishnavite culture, where DouL is celebrated with grandeur and disciplined ritual.

The festival usually lasts three to five days, depending on the lunar calendar and is divided into Deka DouL and Burha DouL. The first day is observed as Gandha Yatra or Gandhot-sava, sometimes accompanied by a ceremonial fire reminiscent of Holika Dahan. The atmosphere resonates with incense, lamps, Naam Prasanga and devotional singing.

The second day marks the main celebration known as Bhor DouL. The idol of Lord Krishna is adorned magnificently and placed on a swing. A grand procession circles the Satra premises amid the rhythmic sounds of khol and taal, accompanied by Gayon Bayon performances. The entire environment becomes immersed in devotion.

The final day is observed as Suweri or Fakuwa, when devotees play with natural colours. Laughter, song and collective participation fill the air with joy. Yet even in its exuberance, the celebration retains a sacred sequence—colours are first offered to the deity before being shared among devotees.

Distinctive customs enrich the Assamese celebration of DouL. In Bordowa, Gosai Furua involves taking the

deity to nearby villages accompanied by Naam Kirtan. In Barpeta, the ritual of Duwar Dhara marks the ceremonial offering at the main gate of the Kirtanghar. The tradition of placing Faku upon the head of the Gosai symbolizes humility and devotion.

Music and performance play a vital role. Borgeet, Holigeet and Bhaona lend a musical and theatrical dimension to the festival. The Holigeets composed by Mahapurusha Madhavdeva are rendered in ragas such as Sindhura, Bhatiyali and Tur Basant, enriching the spiritual ambience.

The mythological roots of the festival are linked with the pan Indian celebration of Holi and the story of Prahlada from the Bhagavata Purana. The demon king Hiranyakashipu, empowered by a boon from Brahma, sought to destroy his son Prahlada for his unwavering devotion to Vishnu. His sister Holika attempted to burn Prahlada in fire, but by divine grace, Prahlada survived while Holika perished. The symbolic burning of Holika signifies the triumph of righteousness over evil. Another devotional narrative appears in the Ghunucha Kirtan by Sridhar Khandali, which recounts how Lord Krishna, leaving Lakshmi, travelled in a swing to the house of Ghunucha, daughter of King Indradryumna. When Krishna stayed there for seven days, Lakshmi, in anger, destroyed Ghunucha's city. Eventually, Krishna pacified Lakshmi and harmony was restored.

The verses describe: "Ehimote Jagannath jay doul chari Koutuke choli jant Ghunuchar bari Indradryumna raja purbe mahotsav kori Krishnak doulot niya thhapila sadori

Ghunuchha name juikhani sarba saubhagini Krishnak dilanta biha bidhivate ani"

These lines reflect the playful yet devotional spirit associated with the DouL tradition. Although Holi and DouL Yatra share common roots, their cultural expressions vary. In Assam, DouL is deeply intertwined with Neo Vaishnavite spirituality. The word DouL signifies the divine throne or seat. Placing Krishna upon the swing symbolizes enthroning the divine within one's own heart. The exchange of colours represents the sharing of love and devotion. Since colours are the same for all, they dissolve social divisions and promote equality.

DouL Yatra thus unites religious devotion, social harmony and Assamese cultural heritage. It stands as a living symbol of unity, forgiveness and fraternity beyond caste, creed and status. Like spring itself, it teaches renewal—the abandonment of ignorance and the embracing of spiritual awakening.

For centuries, the spiritual glory of spring and DouL Yatra has illuminated Assamese society. More than a festival of colours, it is a celebration of life, faith and the eternal victory of light over darkness.

## Holi: A Cultural Festival of spiritual awakening and scientific insight

By: Lalit Gargg

Holi is not merely a play of colors; it is a living expression of the Indian philosophy of life. It is a festival that invites human beings to look within and reminds us that the true beauty of life lies not in external display but in the purity of the inner self. Over time, Holi has undergone many changes. In some places, it has remained a celebration of joy and harmony; in others, it has unfortunately become associated with unruly behavior. Teasing, intoxication, violence, and breaches of dignity stand in complete contrast to the sacred spirit of this festival. In its true sense, Holi does not signify the crossing of moral boundaries but the burning of inner impurities and the renewal of relationships. The need of the hour is to understand the spiritual, scientific, and cultural dimensions of Holi and to restore its dignity and vibrancy in contemporary life.

The foundational inspiration of Holi is linked to the legend of Prahlada and Holika. This narrative is not merely a mythological tale but a deeply symbolic message. Prahlada represents unwavering faith and righteousness, while Holika symbolizes arrogance and stubborn ego. The ritual of Holika Dahan teaches us that truth ultimately triumphs and that the fire of ego eventually consumes itself. When we light the bonfire, its true meaning is not the burning of wood but the burning of anger, jealousy, hatred, and pride within us. Without this inner purification, Holi becomes merely a social event devoid of its spiritual essence. The spiritual symbolism of colors is equally profound. In Indian culture, each color carries its own meaning. Red represents energy and love, yellow symbolizes knowledge and purity, green reflects life and prosperity, and blue signifies the infinite sky and expansive consciousness. When we apply colors to one another, we symbolically dissolve divisions and embrace unity. Colors teach us that diversity is the true beauty of life. Just as a rainbow emerges from the blending of many colors, a harmonious society is formed through the co-existence of diverse communities, ideas, and cultures. This is Holi's enduring cultural message—unity in diversity.

From a scientific perspective, Holi holds seasonal and health-related significance. It is celebrated on the full moon of the month of Phalgun, marking the transition from winter to summer. This seasonal change is a sensitive period for the immune system. Traditionally, sitting near the warmth of the Holika fire was believed to offer health benefits. In ancient times, colors were made from natural sources such as tesu flowers, sandalwood, turmeric, and herbal gual, all of which possessed medicinal properties and protected the skin from infections. Today, the harmful effects of chemical colors challenge this tradition.



Therefore, it is essential to return to natural and eco-friendly alternatives. The vision of a developed India, rooted in cleanliness, green living, and environmental sensitivity, aligns perfectly with the traditional spirit of Holi. Culturally, Holi is a celebration of collective consciousness in Indian society. It is an occasion when social barriers soften and bonds of belonging deepen. In villages, the echoes of folk songs fill the air; in towns and cities, cultural gatherings and performances strengthen the social fabric. Holi also provides an opportunity to forget old grievances and embrace one another anew. It can serve as a bridge of dialogue and harmony—if we remain faithful to its true spirit.

The festival of Holi also finds its most enchanting expression in the divine play of shrikrishna and Radha in Vrindavan and Mathura. The Holi of Braj is not merely a festival but a celebration of divine love and playful devotion. In these sacred towns, colors symbolize the blissful union of the soul with the Supreme. Shri Krishna's playful application of colors upon Radha reflects the transcendence of ego and the joy of pure affection. The message of this tradition is that love dissolves all differences and elevates human relationships to a spiritual plane. The Holi of Vrindavan and Mathura remind us that celebration becomes sacred when it is rooted in devotion, mutual respect, and divine consciousness.

In today's era of globalization, the younger generation often equates modernity with progress. Modernity is welcome, but when it leads to the erosion of values, social balance is disturbed. The phrase "Do not take offense, it is Holi" does not justify hurting someone's dignity; rather, it encourages the sharing of joy with sensitivity and affection. Celebrating Holi while upholding women's dignity, public decorum, and social responsibility reflects true Indian ethos. Joy and discipline are not opposites; they are complementary. Under the leadership of Narendra Modi, India is moving toward a renewed cultural con-

fidence. The vision of a "New India" and a "Developed India" extends beyond economic growth to encompass cultural renaissance. The growing global recognition of Indian traditions, yoga, Ayurveda, and festivals reflects this transformation. Holi has become a symbol of India's cultural identity worldwide. When celebrated with dignity, environmental awareness, and spiritual depth, it strengthens India's soft power and cultural diplomacy.

In a rapidly evolving global order, where technological advancement is accompanied by rising mental stress and social isolation, festivals like Holi offer opportunities to rebuild human connections. In the digital age, people often engage more in virtual communication than in personal interaction. Holi encourages face-to-face meetings, affectionate gestures, and collective joy. It can also become a medium for compassion if we share its colors with the underprivileged, the elderly, and those in need. It is time to collectively pledge to celebrate a drug-free, eco-friendly, and culturally dignified Holi. Schools, social institutions, and religious organizations can play a significant role in spreading its authentic message. Folk songs, cultural programs, poetry gatherings, and collective prayers can give the festival a renewed direction. When Holi evolves from being merely a festival of colors to a festival of ideas and values, its true purpose will be fulfilled.

Ultimately, Holi teaches us that external colors fade, but inner love and harmony endure. If we burn our ego and fill our hearts with compassion, every day can become Holi. The dream of a developed India will be realized only when economic progress moves alongside cultural consciousness. Let us resolve this Holi to celebrate not the violation of boundaries but the celebration of dignity; not division but trust; not recklessness but enthusiasm guided by goodwill. When the colors of Holi permeate our character and conduct, the festival will truly become meaningful and inspiring.



# The Neo-Vaishnavite Legacy of Barpeta's DouL Festival

By: Dipak Kurmi

In the cultural tapestry of Assam lies a jewel often referred to as the "Land of Satras" – Barpeta, the headquarters of Barpeta District. This northeastern Indian town stands as a living testament to the profound spiritual and cultural revolution initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva, the 15th-century saint-scholar whose Neo-Vaishnavite movement transformed the socio-religious landscape of Assam. At the heart of this cultural renaissance is the magnificent celebration of DouL Utsav, a festival that embodies the essence of devotion, community, and artistic expression in its most vibrant form.

## The Philosophical Foundations of Neo-Vaishnavism

Culture, as anthropologist E.B. Tylor eloquently defined, encompasses "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other habits and capabilities acquired by man as a member of a society." The Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam exemplifies this holistic understanding of culture, representing not an isolated phenomenon but an integral component of the broader Indian spiritual tradition.

Born in 1449 in Alipukhuri of Baradowa in Nagaon, Srimanta Sankardeva emerged as a luminous figure destined to transform Assamese society. His "Ek-Saran-Namdharna" (absolute surrender to one deity) emphasized devotion to Lord Krishna through congregational worship, devotional songs, and a rejection of casteism and ritualistic complexities. Sankardeva's philosophy synthesized elements of Vedanta, Bhaktism, monotheism, spiritualism, and humanism, creating a comprehensive spiritual framework characterized by truthfulness, religious liberty, and universal benevolence.

As anthropologist Rajmohan Nath observed, during Sankardeva's pilgrimage across India, he witnessed Vaishnavism becoming "the rolling religion that had achieved, with a new outlook and movement, the unification of the people on a common basis through the medium of congregational prayer accompanied with music." The saint incorporated these insights into his own teachings, creating a distinctive Assamese expression of Vaishnavism that seamlessly integrated artistic expression with spiritual practice.

## Barpeta Satra: The Spiritual Epicenter

The institutional embodiment of Sankardeva's vision came in the form of the Satra, a unique monastic institution that serves as a center for religious, cultural, and educational activities. Among these, the Barpeta Satra holds a position of particular significance, having been established by Madhavdeva, the foremost disciple of Sankardeva. Barpeta Satra is reverentially called "Ditiya Vaikuntha" (Sec-

ond Heaven), reflecting its spiritual importance. The Satra's administration follows a democratic structure, with the Bhora Satriya serving as the religious head and ex-officio president of the managing committee. The Deka Satriya acts as the second-highest official and vice-president. The election process for the Satra Management Committee mirrors the democratic principles of general elections, with a three-year tenure for committee members.

The Satra complex itself is a marvel of traditional architecture and sacred geometry. Entry through one of three main gates called "Batchara" requires removal of footwear as a mark of respect. At the center stands the Kirtan Ghar (prayer hall), an architectural masterpiece reflecting the simple yet distinctive characteristics envisioned by Sankardeva. Unlike conventional Hindu temples, there are no statues of deities inside the Kirtan Ghar, but rather three Guru Ashans (seats) associated with Sankardeva, Madhavdeva, and Padma Ata, collectively representing Lord Krishna in a composite form.

Other significant structures within the complex include the Bhaj Ghar (treasure house), Pat Chang (a wooden platform for meetings), Khatkhati Ghat (bathing steps along a canal), and various historical sites connected to the great saints, each carrying its own architectural uniqueness and spiritual significance.

## The Splendor of DouL Festival

The DouL Festival of Barpeta represents the pinnacle of Neo-Vaishnavite cultural expression, a magnificent confluence of devotion, music, dance, and community celebration. Synchronized with the pan-Indian festival of Holi, the Barpeta DouL Utsav possesses distinctive characteristics that set it apart as a unique cultural phenomenon.

Lasting for three to five days, the festival follows a structured sequence of rituals and celebrations. The three-day celebration is called "Deka DouL" while the four or five-day celebration is known as "Bura DouL." According to tradition, the four-day DouL is held during the full moon of "Phagun" month, while the three-day celebration occurs during the full moon of "Chot."

The festival begins with "Gandha" or "Banhutsava," when devotees collect reeds for the ceremonial bonfire. On this evening, the images of Mahaprabhu DouL Govinda and Kalia Thakur (representing Lord Krishna) are carried from the Manikut Ghar to the Mathar Chotal, accompanied by traditional music. The deity is placed near the bonfire, which is then lit, and Mahaprabhu takes seven ceremonial rounds around it – a ritual called "Meji Puoa" or "Magh Puoa."

The second day, known as "Bhar DouL," features Naam Prasanga (congregational prayer)

*The dance form encompasses multiple genres, including Apsara Nritya, Behar Nritya, Chali Nritya, Dasavatara Nritya, and several others, each with distinctive stylistic elements and narrative purposes. Like other classical Indian dance forms, Satriya adheres to the principles laid down in ancient treatises like Natyasastra, Abhinaya Dharpan, and Sangeet Ratnagar.*

*The musical accompaniment consists of Borgeets (classical compositions by Sankardeva and others) based on traditional ragas, performed with instruments such as khols (drums), taals (cymbals), and flutes*

at Jagmohan Ghar, followed by Ojapali (a traditional narrative art form) and Gayan-Bayan (devotional music and instrumental performances). The Dhuliya Nritya, a mesmerizing drum dance, forms a spectacular highlight of these celebrations.

The final day, "Phakua" or "Suwari," witnesses the pinnacle of festivities. Mahaprabhu and Kalia Thakur are placed on a beautifully adorned palanquin (Dola) and carried in a grand procession to Kanara Satra, where they symbolically visit the home of Ghunucha. The atmosphere becomes electric with the sounds of conch shells, drums, cymbals, and the melodious Holi songs (Holi songs) composed by Sankardeva, Madhavdeva, and other saints:

"Aaji khele holi range brindabane gopa gopi sabe nache phakur anande"



(Today Holi is played in colorful Brindaban, where all the gopis and gopas dance in the joy of colors)

Perhaps the most dramatic moment of the festival occurs upon Mahaprabhu's return to the Kirtan Ghar. In an enactment of the mythological narrative of Krishna returning to his consort Lakshmi after visiting Ghunucha, devotees find the entrance to the Kirtan Ghar barred with bamboo poles. This represents Lakshmi's anger at Krishna's absence. What follows is a ritualistic confrontation between the supporters of Krishna and those of Lakshmi, culminating in the breaking of the bamboo barrier. After this symbolic reconciliation, Mahaprabhu circumambulates the Kirtan Ghar seven times, followed by a verbal duel between representatives of both sides. Eventually, Krishna admits defeat and offers compensation to Lakshmi, thereby gaining readmission to the shrine.

This elaborate ritual drama, performed with passionate involvement by the entire community, encapsulates the profound emotional dynamics of devotion in the Bhakti tradition, where the relationship between the divine and the devotee is conceptualized through human emotional paradigms.

The Artistic Heritage of Satriya Dance

One of the most significant cultural contributions of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement is the Satriya dance tradition. Created by Sankardeva to accompany the Ankiya Nat (a form of devotional theater), this dance form developed within the confines of the Satras over centuries. Traditionally performed exclusively by male monks (bhakats) as part of their spiritual discipline, Satriya dance has now transcended the

monastery walls to reach wider audiences, with both men and women performing on public stages.

The dance form encompasses multiple genres, including Apsara Nritya, Behar Nritya, Chali Nritya, Dasavatara Nritya, and several others, each with distinctive stylistic elements and narrative purposes. Like other classical Indian dance forms, Satriya adheres to the principles laid down in ancient treatises like Natyasastra, Abhinaya Dharpan, and Sangeet Ratnagar.

The musical accompaniment consists of Borgeets (classical compositions by Sankardeva and others) based on traditional ragas, performed with instruments such as khols (drums), taals (cymbals), and flutes. The costumes are typically crafted from pat silk, a variety indigenous to Assam, adorned with local motifs and traditional ornaments.

After centuries of relative obscurity beyond Assam, Satriya dance received national recognition on November 15, 2000, when the Sangeet Natak Akademi, under the chairmanship of Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, officially acknowledged it as the eighth classical dance form of India. This recognition marked a watershed moment in bringing this exquisite art form to national and international attention.

## The Inclusive Spirit of Neo-Vaishnavism

Perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of Sankardeva's movement was its radical inclusivity in a society stratified by caste hierarchies. The Neo-Vaishnavite faith opened its doors to people from all social backgrounds, with Sankardeva's own disciples including individuals from diverse ethnic and religious communities: Chandasai, a Muslim; Gob-

inda, a Garo tribal; Jayantahari, a Bhutia; Srirama, a Kaivarta; and Madhavdeva, from a potter's family.

Women too found equal access to spiritual practice within this tradition. They could participate in Nama-Kirtana, receive initiation, and even hold responsible positions. A notable example is Kanaklata, Sankardeva's granddaughter-in-law, who not only became the head of a Satra but also appointed twelve Sadrat-hikars to establish additional Satras.

This spirit of inclusivity was particularly revolutionary for 15th-century India, establishing a social paradigm that transcended conventional divisions and created a more egalitarian spiritual community. As Mahatma Gandhi observed during his visit to Barpeta, "A great Vaishnava revival under Sankardeva in the 16th century has made Assamese people kindly, tolerant and humane. There is no sign anywhere of that form of untouchability which is to be found in South India."

## Contemporary Significance and Challenges

Today, Barpeta Satra continues to thrive as a living spiritual and cultural institution, attracting devotees and tourists from across India and beyond. During the DouL Festival, more than a hundred thousand people, including women who are otherwise restricted from entering the Satra during the rest of the year, congregate at the monastery to participate in the celebrations.

However, the preservation of this unique cultural heritage faces significant challenges. Despite Satriya dance receiving classical status, institutional support for its conservation and development remains inadequate. Moreover, substantial land be-

longing to Barpeta Satra reportedly remains under illegal occupation, threatening the economic sustainability of this cultural institution.

As Dr Birendra Nath Dutta eloquently stated, "Assam is not a haphazard conglomeration of diverse racial and cultural elements but a composite whole arising out of the integration and synthesis of all of them. Indeed, Assam has been a curious melting pot to which have gone the Aryan and the non-Aryan, the tribal and the non-tribal, the indigenous and the exotic-making for a delightful fare with a wonderful mixed flavor." The Neo-Vaishnavite cultural tradition, with Barpeta Satra at its epicenter, stands as the embodiment of this synthesis.

The Neo-Vaishnavite heritage of Barpeta represents more than just a religious tradition; it embodies a comprehensive cultural ecosystem where philosophy, music, dance, architecture, and social organization coalesce into a harmonious whole. The DouL Festival, with its elaborate rituals, vibrant celebrations, and profound symbolism, offers a window into this rich cultural tapestry.

As we navigate the complexities of the modern world, the inclusive philosophy and artistic richness of Barpeta's Neo-Vaishnavite tradition provide valuable insights for building harmonious communities that celebrate diversity while maintaining cultural continuity. This living heritage deserves not only scholarly attention but also concrete measures for its preservation and revitalization, ensuring that the sacred rhythms of Barpeta's cultural legacy continue to resonate with future generations. (The writer can be reached at dipakkurmipltd@gmail.com)

# DouL Utsav and Assam's Vaishnavite Heritage Holi: A Festival of Renewal

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

DouL Utsav, also known as Fakuwa in Assam, is one of the most significant festivals associated with the state's Vaishnavite traditions. Rooted in the Bhakti movement, it is more than a celebration of colors; it represents the deep spiritual and cultural values of Assamese society. The festival is closely linked to the teachings of Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciple Madhavdeva, who introduced Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam during the 15th and 16th centuries. Through music, dance, and communal participation, DouL Utsav upholds the principles of devotion and harmony, making it a festival of both religious and cultural importance.

The celebration of DouL Utsav primarily takes place in Satras, the monastic institutions established by Sankardeva to promote Vaishnavism. Among them, Barpeta Satra is the most famous for its grand and disciplined observance of the festival. The rituals here follow a well-defined structure, emphasizing devotion through naam-prasanga (devotional prayers), gayan-bayan (traditional music), and bhaona (theatrical performances). Unlike Holi celebrations in other parts of India, which often focus on the playful aspect of colors, DouL Utsav in Assam maintains a strong spiritual and artistic character, keeping the legacy of Vaishnavism alive.

One of the key features of DouL Utsav is the worship of Lord Krishna in his divine and playful form. The festival is deeply symbolic, representing Krishna's leelas (divine plays) and his connection with devotees. The celebration usually lasts for three to five days, depending on the tradition followed in different regions. The early days of the festival are marked by religious gatherings where devotees listen to recitations from the Bhagavata Purana and sing holi-gets, traditional Vaishnavite songs composed by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. These songs express deep devotion and often depict the love between Krishna and the Gopis, symbolizing the soul's longing for the divine.

At Barpeta Satra, the rituals of DouL Utsav begin with the installation of the idol of Lord Krishna, followed by prayers and singing of holi-gets. Devotees participate in naam-prasanga, creating a spiritually uplifting atmosphere. The festival also includes a grand procession where the idol of Krishna is placed on a beautifully decorated chariot and taken around the Satra premises. This ritual symbolizes the journey of devotion and the spreading of spiritual teachings. The final day of the festival, known as Phakua, is when colors are played, but even this is done in a controlled and respectful manner, in contrast to the chaotic celebrations seen in other parts of the country.

The cultural significance of DouL Utsav ex-



tends beyond its religious aspects. It serves as a platform for preserving and promoting Assamese music, dance, and literature. The festival is an occasion where traditional art forms, such as bhaona, are performed to narrate stories from Hindu scriptures. Bhaona, a theatrical tradition introduced by Sankardeva, plays a crucial role in Assamese Vaishnavite heritage, combining drama, music, and philosophy to educate and entertain people. These performances during DouL Utsav not only keep the artistic traditions alive but also reinforce the spiritual teachings of Vaishnavism.

DouL Utsav is celebrated not just at Barpeta Satra but also in several other places across Assam. The DouL Govinda Temple in North

Guwahati is another important center where the festival is observed with great devotion. The celebrations here include extensive naam-prasanga sessions, processions, and the playing of colors in a disciplined manner. Other Satras, such as Sundaridiya Satra and Ganakkuchi Satra, also host grand DouL Utsav celebrations, maintaining the traditions established by Sankardeva and his followers. Each of these places adds its unique elements to the festival while staying true to the core principles of Assamese Vaishnavism.

The impact of DouL Utsav on Assamese society is profound. It strengthens communal bonds, bringing people together in devotion and celebration. The festival transcends social barriers, promoting inclusivity and harmony. People from all backgrounds participate in the festivities, reflecting the universal appeal of Vaishnavism's message of love and devotion. The disciplined and organized nature of the celebrations, especially in places like Barpeta Satra, ensures that the spiritual essence of the festival remains intact despite changing times.

Over the years, DouL Utsav has evolved, but its core values have remained unchanged. While modernization has influenced some aspects of the celebrations, efforts by Satras and local communities have helped preserve the traditional essence of the festival. The elders and monks of these religious institutions play a crucial role in maintaining the sanctity of the rituals, ensuring that DouL Utsav continues to be a meaningful spiritual event rather than just a festival of colors.

DouL Utsav is not just a religious observance; it is a vital part of Assam's cultural identity. Through its blend of devotion, art, and communal participation, the festival continues to reflect the spirit of Assamese Vaishnavism. It serves as a reminder of the rich heritage left behind by Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciples, ensuring that their teachings remain relevant in contemporary society. The festival's ability to bring people together in a celebration of faith and tradition makes it one of the most cherished events in Assam, preserving its Vaishnavite heritage for generations to come.

By: Dr Vinod Chandrashekhar Dixit

The festival of Holi is a vibrant celebration that urges everybody to disremember social divisions and let playfulness reign. Celebrated the day after the full moon, Holi is a two-day festival synonymous with harvest and prosperity. It's a celebration of life itself, not just colours. The bright colours of Holi demolish social barriers of caste and creed, promoting harmony and peace. The festival commemorates the Hindu mythological tale of Prahlad emerging unscathed from flames despite being drawn into the fire by demones Holika. This symbolizes the victory of good over evil, virtues over vices, and light over darkness.

Holi is a time when social structures loosen, and people come together to forgive, love, and unite. It's a celebration that promotes harmony, peace, and happiness. The festival is marked by traditional customs, including playing with colours, singing, and feasting. The air is filled with laughter and the vibrant colours of gul and abir. People apply colours to each other, forgetting past grudges and bonding over shared joy.

The celebrations differ across India, with notable festivities in Vrindavan, Mathura, and Barsana. In Vrindavan, the town where Hindu god Krishna played Holi with his consort Radha, the festival is a grand affair. The streets are filled with colours, music, and dance, creating an atmosphere of pure joy. In other parts of the country, people celebrate with unique customs and traditions.

Holi is also a time for social bonding and rejuvenation. People come together to share sweets, snacks, and drinks, strengthening bonds and creating memories. The festival promotes forgiveness, love, and unity, encouraging people to let go of past differences and start anew.

As Sahir Ludhianavi wrote, "Zindagi ke her rang ko chandlamhaatmeindekhlia/Meri Pahali Holi ne mujhefalsafanabana diya" (I saw all colours of life in a few moments/My very first Holi made me a philosopher). These lines capture the essence of Holi – a festival that

makes us appreciate the colours of life and teaches us to live in harmony.

In today's world, where divisions and conflicts are rampant, Holi serves as a reminder of the importance of unity and love. It's a time to reflect on our actions and strive for a more harmonious society. As we celebrate Holi, let's remember the true spirit of the festival – to spread love, joy, and colours, and to make the world a more peaceful place.

The festival of Holi is a celebration of life, love, and colours. It's a time to come together, forget past differences, and bond over shared joy. Let's celebrate this vibrant festival and enrich our lives with love, forgiveness, and unity. As the colours of Holi fade, let's carry the spirit of love and harmony forward, making our lives and the world a more beautiful place.



# Will 'remove infiltrators from WB' Deletion of their names from rolls made Mamata nervous: Shah

**MATHURAPUR (WB), March 2:** Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Monday sharpened the BJP's "infiltration" pitch, declaring that while "only names are being deleted now" from West Bengal's electoral rolls under the SIR, they would be "removed from the state" once the party comes to power, raising the stakes ahead of the Assembly polls.

Launching the BJP's 'Poriborton Yatra' from Mathurapur in South 24 Parganas, his first visit since the publication of the post-SIR rolls on Saturday, Shah slammed the TMC government over what he described as years of unchecked infiltration under Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's watch, signalling that border security and citizenship will anchor the BJP's final electoral push.

"Right now, only names are being deleted from voter rolls, and Mamata Didi is nervous. Once BJP forms the government, we will identify and remove every infiltrator from Bengal," he said, addressing a gathering in the coastal belt abutting the Sundarbans and close to the porous Indo-Bangladesh frontier.

His remarks came days after the Election Commission's post-SIR rolls recorded 63.66 lakh deletions, 8.3 per cent of the electorate, reducing the voter base to just over 7.04 crore ahead of the 2026 Assembly polls.

More than 60.06 lakh electors have also been placed in the "under adjudication" category, subject to scrutiny in the coming weeks, marking the most sweeping electoral reset in the state since 2002.

For the BJP, which has built its Bengal pitch around citizenship and border security since 2019, the revised rolls have provided both validation and velocity.

"TMC has made Bengal a swarg (heaven) for infiltrators," Shah al-



leged, asserting that the border state's security had been compromised by "appeasement politics".

"Bengal is a bordering state. The TMC cannot ensure security because they allow infiltration. Only the BJP can provide security to a bordering state like Bengal," he said. Drawing a calibrated distinction between "infiltrators" and Hindu refugees, a politically sensitive divide in the Matua-dominated refugee belt, Shah sought to reassure Hindu migrants from Bangladesh.

"I want to assure Hindu refugees that not a single refugee will lose their citizenship," he said, reiterating the party's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) plank.

The SIR churn has been sharpest in the Matua belt across North 24 Parganas, Nadia and parts of north Bengal, where community leaders claim nearly 40 per cent of the community has been impacted either through deletions or by 'under adjudication', an assertion that, if validated, could reverberate across 40-50 Assembly seats where the Dalit Hindu refugee bloc anchors the BJP's core vote bank.

The 'Poriborton Yatra', Shah said, was not merely about a

change of chief minister but about "freeing Bengal from infiltrators, corruption and syndicate raj".

"Change means securing our borders. Change means ending corruption in jobs. Change means safety for mothers and sisters. Change means rule of law," he said, repeatedly asking the crowd whether infiltrators should be removed and whether corruption in recruitment should end.

Shah also accused Banerjee of duplicity on religious issues.

"Mamata Banerjee is now busy inaugurating temples as she knows the Hindus are not happy with her. But she is allowing the building of Babri Masjid in Bengal. In a well-crafted conspiracy, she has ensured Humayun Kabir's exit from the party so that he can build the Babri Masjid. This is a nexus between Kabir and Mamata Didi," he alleged.

TMC MLA Kabir had in December last year laid the foundation stone for a mosque — modelled on Ayodhya's Babri Masjid — at Rejinagar in West Bengal's Murshidabad district. He was later expelled from the party.

Besides infiltration, Shah

ruption, fiscal stress and alleged dynastic ambitions within the ruling party.

Listing alleged scams — teacher recruitment, municipal appointments, cattle smuggling, PDS ration distribution, MGNREGA and PM Awas — he accused the TMC of institutionalising graft and alleged that several of its leaders had landed in jail.

"And the BJP who provided protection to all these scams is being sent to the Rajya Sabha by Mamata Banerjee," he said, criticising the TMC's decision to nominate former DGP Rajeev Kumar to the Upper House.

Kumar, who retired as the acting Director General of Police of West Bengal in January this year and earlier headed the Kolkata Police, was at the centre of a high-profile confrontation between the state government and central agencies during the CBI probe into the Saradha chit fund case.

"Corruption has become Bengal's identity. Whenever Bengal's name comes up in the country, the first thing that comes to mind is the corrupt TMC government," Shah said.

In a pointed "bhaipo" (nephew) barb aimed at TMC national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee, Shah alleged that the chief minister's real goal was to install her nephew in power.

"If the people here make the mistake of voting again for the TMC, Bengal will have a government run by nephew Abhishek Banerjee and not by Mamata Didi," he said.

"Bring a BJP government," he told the crowd, "and within 45 days we will implement the Seventh Pay Commission for state government employees, fill vacant posts without bribery, ensure security for women, and jail those who killed BJP workers." (PTI)

# Modi-Carney talks: India, Canada seal landmark uranium deal; set USD 50 bn trade target

**NEW DELHI, March 2:** India and Canada on Monday sealed key pacts on supplies of Uranium and critical minerals and vowed to soon conclude a comprehensive economic partnership agreement, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Canadian counterpart Mark Carney finalising a new framework to shore up ties including taking bilateral annual trade to USD 50 billion by 2030.

In their wide-ranging talks, the two leaders also pledged to ramp up cooperation in defence, critical technologies, small and modular nuclear reactors, education and renewable energy as Modi said the relations between the two countries are now filled with new energy, mutual trust and positivity.

Canada is set to support India's civil nuclear energy sector under the USD 2.6 billion uranium supply agreement.

The prime minister said both sides agreed that terrorism, extremism, and radicalisation are common and serious challenges not only for India and Canada but for all humanity. "Our close cooperation against these is crucial for global peace and stability," he said.

Modi and Carney also deliberated on the precarious security situation in West Asia with PM Modi asserting that India supports the resolution of all conflicts through dialogue and diplomacy.

"The current situation in West Asia is a matter of deep concern for us. India supports the resolution of all disputes through dialogue and diplomacy. We will continue to work with all countries to ensure the safety of all Indian citizens in the region," the prime minister said in his media statement.

The major outcomes of the Modi-Carney talks were their decision to expand trade relations, a move that comes amid Canada's increasingly frosty economic ties with the Trump administration.

The fresh move to bolster ties came as part of ongoing efforts by the two sides to reset the relations



that came under severe strain following a diplomatic row over the killing of a Khalistani separatist in 2023.

"Our goal is to reach USD 50 billion in trade by 2030. Unlocking the full potential of economic cooperation is our priority. Therefore, we have decided to finalise the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement soon."

"This will create new investment and employment opportunities in both countries," Modi said.

"Canada's pension funds have invested USD 100 billion in India. This symbolises their deep belief in India's growth story," he said.

The volume of two-way annual trade at present is around USD 13 billion.

The prime minister said the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on critical minerals will strengthen resilient supply chains. Canada is known for its significant reservoir of critical minerals and rare earth materials.

"In the energy sector, we are building a next-generation partnership, which will focus on hydrocarbons as well as renewable energy, green hydrogen and energy storage," Modi said.

"In civil nuclear energy, we have signed a landmark deal for long-term uranium supply. We will also work together on small modular reactors and advanced reactors," he said.

Modi said the growing cooperation between the two countries in

the field of defence and security symbolises the deep mutual trust and the maturity of the relationship.

"We will work to enhance defence industries, maritime domain awareness and military exchanges. To this end, today we have decided to establish the India-Canada defence dialogue," he said.

The prime minister also highlighted the expansion of two-way ties in the education sector.

"New partnerships between several universities in AI, healthcare, agriculture and innovation are being announced. We also agreed on Canadian universities opening campuses in India," he said.

The prime minister also made a mention of how India and Canada share an "unwavering belief" in democratic values.

"We celebrate diversity. The well-being of humanity is our shared vision. This vision inspires us to move forward in every field. Today, we discussed transforming this vision into a next level partnership," he said.

In his remarks, Carney mentioned the future of India-Canada energy ties. "Today, we are launching a strategic energy partnership with significant potential to expand bilateral energy trade. We've signed a new critical minerals partnership spanning development, processing and secure supply chains for clean energy, electric vehicles and advanced manufacturing," he said. (PTI)

## Make appropriate arrangements for Kashi Vishwanath visitors: Adityanath

**VARANASI, March 1:** Expecting a large number of devotees at the Kashi Vishwanath Dham during the upcoming festivals, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Sunday directed the officials concerned to make appropriate arrangements for the visitors, asserting that there should be no complaints of mistreatment by them.

During a visit to Varanasi, Adityanath also directed the officials to ensure access for devotees to the shops built in the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor and emphasised that reasonable prices should be fixed for the goods sold there.

He said religious institutions are not a source of money, but a place of devotion; therefore, better arrangements should be ensured for devotees at these places.

The chief minister reviewed development works, construction projects and law and order during a meeting at the circuit house auditorium, an official statement said. He asked the officials to expedite the construction work at the Manikarnika and Harishchandra

ghats by increasing human resources, emphasising that historical heritage should be protected under all circumstances.

He also directed that a robust passenger boarding and deboarding system be established at the ropeway station under development in Godaulia.

All religious activities should be conducted within the premises of religious sites, Adityanath said, asserting that no new traditions will be permitted.

Adityanath, who is on a two-day visit to Varanasi, visited the Kashi Vishwanath Dham where he performed 'aarti' and offered prayers, the statement said.

The chief minister also inspected a road construction project being carried out under the Chief Minister Green Road Infrastructure Development Scheme (CMGRIDS). Reviewing the progress of the works, he directed the officials to ensure that all projects are completed within the stipulated timeframe, following the prescribed quality standards. (PTI)

## RS polls: Shiv Sena (UBT), Cong jostle for lone winnable seat

**MUMBAI, March 2:** The upcoming Rajya Sabha polls have emerged as a crucial test for the MVA's unity, as both Shiv Sena (UBT) and Congress on Monday staked claim to the alliance's lone winnable seat while insisting that internal talks are ongoing.

Shiv Sena (UBT) MLA Aaditya Thackeray denied any deadlock in the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi's talks for the March 16 polls, asserting that the solo seat should go to his party due to its numerical strength.

The last date for filing nominations for polls to the seven Rajya Sabha seats is March 5. The elections will be held on March 16, and votes will be counted on the same day.

Speaking to PTI, Maharashtra Congress president Harshwardhan Sapkal also stressed that his party is firm on its claim to contest the seat, but said that talks were underway and decisions would be taken after consultations.

Thackeray, in a post on X, said, "There is no deadlock in talks for the Rajya Sabha; all parties are in communication with each other. We have put forward our claim on the upcoming Rajya Sabha seat, as numerically and in terms of the rotation policy fixed for the MVA, the seat should be contested by the @Shiv-SenaUBT."

Senior party leader Sanjay Raut said discussions within the MVA are on for the lone Rajya Sabha seat ahead of the March 16 polls, but as the single largest Opposition party, the stand of the Shiv Sena UBT will

be crucial to the decision.

Speaking to reporters, Raut said that several leaders, including former MPs Rajan Vichare and Vinayak Raut, have met party chief Uddhav Thackeray to express their desire to contest the Rajya Sabha polls.

Rajan Vichare and Vinayak Raut lost the 2024 Lok Sabha election. "Talks are underway consistently among the constituents, and it will continue till the last minute. Discussion among the prominent leaders of the parties is on," he said.

In April, Rajya Sabha stint will end for NCP (SP) chief Sharad Pawar, Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Priyanka Chaturvedi, Fauzia Khan of NCP (SP), Ramdas Athawale of RPI (Athawale), BJP's Bhagwat Karad, Congress's Rajani Patil and NCP's Dhairysheel Patil.

With numbers heavily stacked in favour of the ruling Mahayuti, the MVA can manage to get only one member elected to the Upper House of Parliament and the legislative council.

However, all three MVA constituents — Shiv Sena (UBT), Congress and NCP (SP) — have staked claim to the sole seat. The Sena (UBT) has 20 MLAs, followed by Congress with 16 and NCP (SP) with 10.

The BJP-led Mahayuti is likely to get six of the seven seats due to their massive strength in the assembly. The names of National Women's Commission chief Vijaya Rahatkar and BJP general secretary Vinod Tawde are doing the rounds, while Union Minister Ramdas Athawale is likely to be renominated from the BJP's quota. (PTI)

## Spl Court order discharging Kejriwal and others in excise case illegal: CBI

**NEW DELHI, March 2:** Challenging the special court order discharging former Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and others in the excise policy case, the CBI has submitted to the Delhi High Court that the order was based "on a selective reading of the prosecution case, disregarding the material showing the culpability of the accused", and was "patently illegal".

In its 974-page petition before the high court, the CBI said the Special Judge essentially conducted a mini-trial dealing with separate limbs of conspiracy in isolation rather than assessing the actions of the accused cumulatively. Terming the order "perverse", the agency said it suffers from "errors apparent on the face", is based on "misreading" of facts and violates the Supreme Court's assertions related to the stage when charges are to be framed. The special court had on Friday discharged Kejriwal, Sisodia and 21 others in the liquor-policy case by refusing to take cognisance of the CBI chargesheet against them. Among the 21 people given a clean chit in the case is Telangana Jagruti president K Kavitha.

Special Judge Jitendra Singh had rapped the CBI for lapses in the investigation, saying there was no cogent evidence against Kejriwal and no prima facie case against Sisodia and the other accused. (PTI)

## Haryana budget proposes 'Agri Discom', 'green climate fund', 20 pc reservation for Agniveers

**CHANDIGARH, March 2:** Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini on Monday presented the budget for 2026-27 with an outlay of ₹ 2.23 lakh crore, with several initiatives including a new electricity distribution company for the agriculture sector, a ₹ 100 crore green climate resilience fund and 20 per cent reservation for Agniveers in the state police force.

Saini also announced setting up of 'Adarsh Pariksha Kendra' on a public-private partnership model, Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) under IG rank police officer, 'Wedding City' each in Gurugram, Kharkhoda and Pinjore on the concept of 'Wed in India', a modern film city at Pinjore, besides stating that Rajiv Gandhi Sports Complex, Daultabad, will be upgraded to the state's first 'Para Sports Stadium'.

Sporting a saffron turban, Saini said 5,000 suggestions were received from various quarters, and these have been incorporated in the budget.

Describing the state budget as the "non-stop government's" 12th budget, Saini said his government has fulfilled 60 out of 217 promises made in his party's poll manifesto. Sharing details of the budget proposals, the chief minister announced a capital expenditure of ₹ 28,205 crore for 2026-27, which is 12.6 per cent of the total allocation.



In his over three-hour-long budget address, Saini said the World Bank has approved ₹ 2,716 crore of financial assistance for the 'Haryana Clean Air Project'.

The chief minister announced a 20 per cent reservation in recruitment to various posts in Haryana Police for 'Agniveers' returning after service in the Indian Army.

In addition, special recruitment of 1,300 Agniveers in Haryana Police will also be undertaken next year, said Saini.

"To strengthen the state's disaster preparedness, I propose the formation of the Haryana State Disaster Response Force comprising 1,149 personnel. Maximum participation of Agniveers will be ensured in it," he said.

Saini also informed the House that the government of India has

recently strengthened MGNREGA by launching it as the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VBG RAM G). "I have made a provision of ₹ 610 crore for 125 days of wage-based employment guarantee annually to every rural family in Haryana," he said.

Among new proposals, the budget proposed setting up a 'Haryana Agri Discom' — a third power distribution company aimed to ensure faster release of connections and reliable and uninterrupted electricity supply for farmers.

"This will serve all 5,084 agricultural feeders and 7.12 lakh agricultural consumers across Haryana. This initiative will ensure uninterrupted power supply to every farm and significantly accel-

erate services, from providing new tubewell connections to replacement of faulty transformers," he said. This initiative will prove to be a milestone in enhancing farmers' income, he noted.

The chief minister also proposed the setting up of the 'Haryana Green Climate Resilience Fund' with an initial provision of ₹ 100 crore which is in line with the goal of net-zero emissions by 2070.

This fund will accelerate investments in zero-emission vehicles, renewable energy, energy efficiency, water conservation, urban greening, climate-resilient agriculture, and nature-based solutions across the state. Saini also proposed setting up 'Adarsh Pariksha Kendra' in every assembly constituency under a public-private partnership (PPP) model.

The first such Kendra will be established in Kurukshetra by December 25, 2026, he informed the House. On the agriculture front, Saini said last year, under the "Mera Pani-Meri Virasat Yojana", his government gave an incentive of ₹ 8,000 per acre to those farmers who gave up paddy cultivation.

"In 2026-27, I propose to provide an additional bonus of ₹ 2,000 per acre to such farmers who choose to cultivate pulses, oilseeds, and cotton in place of paddy," he said. (PTI)

## Iran Supreme Leader's killing Protests across UP as people mourn Khamenei, slam US-Israel nexus

**LUCKNOW, March 1:** Large-scale protests led by Shia Muslims broke out in various districts of Uttar Pradesh, including the state capital Lucknow, on Sunday to condemn the killing of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in a joint US-Israeli attack.

Terming Khamenei's 'martyrdom' a huge loss to humanity and the silencing of a strong voice for their rights, the protesters held a demonstration at the Chhotta Imbarara in Lucknow to condemn the "cowardly act" of the US and Israel.

Police said the gatherings were peaceful with no untoward incidents reported from anywhere in the state.

On Sunday evening, a large group of protesters took out a candlelight march from the Chhotta Imbarara to the Bada Imbarara in Lucknow.

Samajwadi Party spokesperson Abbas Haidar, who was at the protest site, told PTI Videos, "This (killing Khamenei) is an act of cowardice by the US and Israel. People who are peace-loving and have faith in justice are deeply pained."

The chairman of the Lucknow Islamic Centre, Maulana Khalid Rasheed Firangi Mahali, told PTI, "The way Iran has been attacked is deeply concerning. Iran is a sovereign, independent country, and the attack by Israel and the US violated all international laws and demonstrated extreme brutality."

"We strongly condemn the killing of Ayatollah Khamenei, who had the full authority to defend his country. We feel the international community, including the United Nations, should intervene in this matter to stop this war immediately."

Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei, who was widely respected by the Shia community, was killed in an airstrike in Tehran early Saturday during a joint Israel-US attack on Iran.

Iranian state television and the state-run IRNA news agency announced the 86-year-old's death early Sunday, triggering a wave of protests and mourning across the world, including India.

According to reports coming from Jaunpur, angry protesters, including women, took out a march from the Imbarara at Pandariba in the Kotwali area, holding placards with anti-US and anti-Israel slogans.

Shia cleric Maulana Mohammad Raza, who took part in the march, said the way the US attacked and

killed Khamenei exposed its "true identity" before the entire world.

The protesters also prayed for the safety of the people of Iran and demanded appropriate security measures for Indians living in the Middle East.

In Aligarh, a large number of people gathered near the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) and held a demonstration against the attack on Khamenei.

The protesters, who were joined by many students from the AMU, submitted a memorandum addressed to the president of India, demanding that India express its clear protest against the brutal killing of dozens of schoolchildren in Iran by the US military.

In southern Iran, at least 85 people were reported killed when a girls' school was struck, and dozens more were wounded, the local governor told the Iranian state TV on Saturday.

Former AMU student leader Mehboob Alam told reporters, "Ayatollah Khamenei was not only the spiritual leader of the Shia community but also the voice of all those who stood against the imperialist forces posing a serious threat to world peace. His death is a grave loss to humanity."

Around 200 km away in Muzaffarnagar, thousands of Shia Muslims marched with Khamenei's photographs from Kidwai Nagar to Fakharshah Chowk, and submitted a memorandum to the district magistrate addressed to the president of India.

Shia cleric Asad Raza Hussaini said, "We condemn the brutal assassination of Ayatollah Khamenei in Iran."

In Meerut, members of the Shia sect, including women and children, staged protests at Abdullahpur, Railway Road, Mansabiya and Zaidi Farm, mourning the killing of Iran's supreme leader.

Prayer meetings were also held at the Imam Bargah Panjtanai and Darbar-e-Hussaini in Zaidi Farm.

A similar protest was witnessed in Jhansi, where a large number of Shia Muslims gathered at Masjid-e-Imamiya in Mewatipura to mourn the killing of Khamenei, calling it an attack on world peace.

Cleric Haider Zaidi said, "Our community opposes any form of oppression. The military action (in Iran) is a form of bullying and against humanity. We will continue to raise our voice in a non-violent manner."

Reports of protests also came from Ambedkar Nagar, Rampur, Barabanki, Shahjahanpur and Ghaziabad. (PTI)

## Laxmi Narayan Kanoi Administrative Bhawan inaugurated at Dibru College

**HT Correspondent**

**DIBRUGARH, March 2:** In a major boost to higher education infrastructure in Upper Assam, the Laxmi Narayan Kanoi Administrative Bhawan at Dibru College was formally inaugurated on Monday at an estimated cost of ₹1.5 crore.

The state-of-the-art building is a project of the Jyoti Lalita Kanoi Foundation and marks a significant milestone in the institution's development journey.

The new administrative building was inaugurated by education minister Ranaj Pegu in the presence of power minister Prasanta Phukan, vice chancellor of Dibrugarh University Prof Jiten Hazarika, and ATDC Ltd chairman Rituparna Baruah, along with other dignitaries.

Addressing the gathering, Pegu acknowledged the contribution of the Jyoti Lalita Kanoi Foundation in constructing the building and expressed gratitude to the Education Department, teachers and students.

Referring to the Vidyajali Scheme, he said Assam has emerged as a frontrunner, with nearly 1.2 lakh benches donated to schools across the state under the initiative.

He stressed the need for innovation in higher education to align with India's development goals by 2047.

"We must adopt innovative plans and new styles of teaching, focusing on short attention-span modules of 15-20 minutes and experiential learning,"

he said, adding that emphasis should be placed on improving placement percentages and expanding residential hostel facilities in higher education institutions.

Pegu also urged donors to register contributions through the Vidyajali Portal to ensure transparency and proper record-keeping.

The Administrative Bhawan has been constructed to streamline academic and administrative functions, improving service delivery for students and faculty members.

The project reflects a strong public-private partnership aimed at advancing educational excellence in the region.

Representatives of the college, including Governing Body President Prof Kalyan Bhuyan, foundation chairman CA Jyoti Prasad Kanoi and principal & secretary Dr Ranjan Changmai, expressed gratitude to all stakeholders for their support in realising the project.

Established on August 16, 1963, Dibru College is one of the premier institutions of higher education in Dibrugarh. Located near Jalan Nagar Tea Estate, the college currently serves over 3,600 students across higher secondary and undergraduate programmes.

The inauguration of the Laxmi Narayan Kanoi Administrative Bhawan adds a new chapter to the college's legacy, symbolising sustained investment in strengthening Assam's educational infrastructure.

## KMSS, SMSS demand probe into MGNREGA action plan

*Corruption allegations rock Athani Block*

**HT Correspondent**

**DHUBRI, March 2:** Allegations of nepotism and financial irregularities have surfaced in connection with the MGNREGA Action Plan for the financial year 2025-26 in Kajaikata Gaon Panchayat under Athani Development Block of Dhubri district.

In a joint move, the Dhubri district units of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) and Students' Mukti Sangram Samiti (SMSS) submitted a memorandum to the Dhubri District Commissioner on Monday, seeking immediate intervention and a high-level inquiry into the matter.

According to the memorandum, the action plan for 2025-26 was allegedly prepared without convening a mandatory Gram Sabha, bypassing the democratic process required under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

Locals have alleged that the document was drafted by a select few individuals instead of being ap-



proved through a village assembly. Specific allegations have been levelled against Atawar Hussain, husband of Kajaikata Gaon Panchayat President Mansura Khatun, and Joyal Abedin, President of the Panchayat.

The organisations claimed that

the action plan was prepared "according to their own wishes," allegedly prioritising personal interests over the developmental needs of rural workers.

The KMSS and SMSS have also raised concerns about alleged irregularities in Shagunmari Gaon Pan-

chayat under the same Athani Development Block.

They have demanded a comprehensive probe into the legitimacy of the 2025-26 MGNREGA action plans, including possible embezzlement of funds and execution of "ghost" projects.

Warning of agitation, the organisations stated that if a transparent investigation is not initiated and those found guilty are not held accountable, they will launch a "strong democratic movement" across the district.

"MGNREGA is meant to be a lifeline for the poor, not a personal fund for panchayat representatives and their families," a KMSS spokesperson said, adding that they would not remain silent if villagers' rights were compromised.

Officials at the Dhubri District Commissioner's office confirmed receipt of the memorandum.

However, no formal announcement regarding the initiation of an inquiry had been made at the time of filing this report.

## Mera Yuva Bharat Kendra organises Viksit Bharat Youth Parliament 2026

**HT Correspondent**

**TEZPUR, March 2:** Viksit Bharat Youth Parliament 2026 was organised by Mera Yuva Bharat Kendra, Sonitpur, Assam, in collaboration with Naba Prabha Janakalyan Samiti at Tezpur College on March 2.

The programme was inaugurated by the Principal of Tezpur College, Dr Manoj Kumar Hazarika, who attended as the chief guest and lit the ceremonial lamp. Dr BN Medhi, retired Professor of Assam Agricultural University, and Dr Abdul Mazid, retired Principal of LOKD College, were present as guests of honour. The Youth Parliament was judged by Dr Mridula Sarma, Dr Trishna Rani Deka, Dr Dharti Sarma, Barnali Devi and Mohim Acharyya. The welcome address was delivered by Nurul Amin, secretary of Naba Prabha Janakalyan Samiti, while Dr Sankar Chakraborty, president of the Samiti, proposed the vote of thanks.

More than 40 students from Tezpur College, Darrang College, Tezpur Law College, LGB Girls' College and other institutions participated in the Youth Parliament.

## Governor extends warm greetings to people of Assam on Holi

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, March 2:** Governor Lakshman Prasad Acharya has conveyed his heartfelt greetings and best wishes to the people of the state on the joyous occasion of Holi.

In his message, the Governor described Holi as a vibrant celebration reflecting India's rich cultural ethos and the enduring spirit of unity in diversity.

He said the festival, marked by colours and festivity, symbolises the triumph of hope over despair and harmony over discord.

Governor Acharya expressed confidence that the festival would further strengthen bonds of goodwill, fraternity and mutual respect among all sections of society.

He noted that Holi offers an opportunity to renew social ties, foster understanding and reinforce a shared commitment to peace and collective progress.

Extending his wishes for happiness and prosperity, he urged people to celebrate the festival with joy, responsibility and inclusiveness.

He expressed hope that the colours of Holi would inspire positivity, bring renewed energy to every household and usher in health, success and well-being for all.

The Governor also appealed to citizens to observe the festival in a safe and environmentally conscious manner, preserving the true spirit of togetherness and compassion that Holi represents.

## DDMA issues safety alert ahead of storm and lightning season in Karbi Anglong

**HT Bureau**

**DIPHU, March 2:** With the storm and lightning season approaching, the District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA), Karbi Anglong, has issued a comprehensive safety alert directing all government departments and municipal bodies to undertake immediate preparedness measures to minimise risks from high-speed winds and heavy rainfall.

The directive, issued by the Chief Executive Officer of the DDMA, follows specific guidelines from the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) and stresses a proactive approach to public safety and infrastructure protection.

Under the advisory, all health and educational institutions—including MPHCs, CHCs, District Hospitals, Anganwadi Centres and schools—have been instructed to conduct urgent structural audits.

Institutions must ensure that roofs, windows, doors and signboards are securely fastened.

Authorities have also been asked to check and secure loose tin sheets, water tanks, solar panels and electrical connections.

Health facilities have been directed to maintain

backup power supply systems and ensure adequate stocks of emergency medicines and first-aid kits.

Municipal Boards have been tasked with high-priority pre-storm maintenance to reduce potential urban hazards.

Instructions include securing or removing unstable hoardings, glow signs and outdated display boards, trimming vulnerable tree branches, coordinating with APDCL to address loose electrical wiring and clearing drainage systems to prevent flash waterlogging during heavy downpours.

To strengthen emergency coordination, all departments have been asked to submit updated contact details of designated nodal officers to the DDMA.

A detailed preparedness report from each department must be submitted by March 9, 2026.

Emergency response teams equipped with manpower and necessary machinery have been directed to remain on standby for debris clearance and rescue operations.

"The safety of our citizens is paramount. We urge the public to remain vigilant, secure their own property, and cooperate fully with district authorities during this season," the District Administration stated.

## Festival of Words in Jorhat marks anniversary of Satbhoni Samanway Sahitya Kshetra

**HT Correspondent**

**JORHAT, March 2:** The second anniversary celebration of the social media literary platform Satbhoni Samanway Sahitya Kshetra will be held on March 8 at the Central Sahitya Sabha Bhawan in Jorhat, coinciding with International Women's Day.

The programme will feature a special literary gathering and felicitation ceremony, during which 81 members of the platform will be honoured for their creative contributions to literature.

On the occasion, journalist Niranjan Das and physiotherapist Dr Arun Jyoti Hazarika will be conferred the 'Manab Dorodi Samman' in recognition of their notable service to society. As part of the celebration, the platform's second annual anthology, 'Satbhoni Kakoli', will be formally released.

Three poetry collections will also be unveiled, including "Emuthi Sopon Suriya Gaan" (third collection) by Rekha Hazarika of Na-

harkatia, "Tumi Mur Nijanor Noi" (second collection) by Dhanti Pator of Nagaon, and "Asom Rupohi" (second collection) by Divya Barpatragohain of Sivasagar.

Speeches highlighting the significance of International Women's Day and the role of literature in society will be delivered by Jyotirekha Saikia, Secretary of the Central Office of Assam Sahitya Sabha, educator Jyoti Rajkhowa Phukan, and teacher Jeevan Chandra Bora. A special poetry recitation session titled "Anubhabar Anami Gunjan" will be one of the major attractions of the event.

Chief administrator Kiran Chandra Nath, president Ramprasad Sharma, secretary Aditya Borbora and publisher Jyotsna Saikia have invited literature enthusiasts from across Assam to attend the programme. Organisers stated that the gathering aims to strengthen unity, harmony and literary collaboration among writers, reflecting the collective spirit of "Satbhoni."

## National Science Day celebrated at Bodoland University

*17th Foundation Day concludes*

**HT Correspondent**

**KOKRAJHAR, March 2:** Bodoland University celebrated its 17th Foundation Day at the university complex in Kokrajhar recently, coinciding with the nationwide observance of National Science Day.

The programme brought together founding members, former Vice Chancellors, academicians, researchers, students and distinguished guests to mark the university's journey of growth and to promote scientific awareness in the region.

The university is regarded as a premier higher educational institution in the Bodoland Territorial Region and Lower Assam.

The celebration began with the ceremonial lighting of the lamp and rendition of the University Anthem, followed by the inauguration of exhibitions featuring models, posters, quiz and speech competitions by Vice Chancellor Prof BL Ahuja.

The event was attended by Rector Prof Jatin Samah, Registrar Dr Prahlad Basumatary and Academic Registrar Dr Manjil Basumatary, along with faculty members, college teachers and students.

Among the special invitees were former Assam minister and founding member of the university Pramila Rani Brahma, Chairman of the



Pollution Control Board Assam Dr Arup Kumar Misra, former president of Bodo Sahitya Sabha Dr Kameswar Brahma, and several former Vice Chancellors and senior academicians associated with the university and Gauhati University Kokrajhar Campus.

In his address, Prof Ahuja highlighted the university's progress over the past seventeen years, emphasising achievements in academics, research and community engagement.

Referring to National Science Day, he spoke about the historic discovery of the Raman Effect by Nobel Laureate CV Raman and underlined the importance of science and its application in

everyday life, as well as the need to promote scientific temper among students and the public.

A special lecture-cum-interaction session was delivered earlier on February 27 by Prof M Rafiqul Awal, also known as Acharya Adibandhu, former Kerr-McGee Professor of Petroleum Engineering at Texas Tech University, USA.

Students from various schools, colleges, technical institutions and the university participated in competitions, displaying 61 posters and 19 models, while 11 quiz teams and 12 students took part in the speech competition.

This year's theme, "Women in Science: Catalysing Viksit Bharat," highlighted the contributions of women scientists to nation-building and inclusive scientific development.

Notably, all organising sub-committee coordinators were women faculty members, reflecting the spirit of the theme.

The programme also featured speeches on the significance of the university's 17-year journey and the role of science and technology in addressing contemporary challenges and fostering sustainable development.

The celebration concluded with the felicitation of distinguished faculty members, research scholars and meritorious students for their outstanding academic and research contributions.

## NFR commissions new facility to boost DEMU availability

*Benefits of infrastructure push extend beyond railway operations*

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, March 2:** North-east Frontier Railway (NFR) has strengthened its operational infrastructure with the commissioning of a Load Box Testing facility at the newly constructed DEMU shed at New Bongaigaon Carriage & Wagon Workshop, a move expected to significantly improve DEMU train availability and passenger convenience across the Northeast.

The workshop has completed key electrical modifications, including cable extensions and installation of an additional panel to conduct Load Box testing within the new shed.

The upgraded facility ensures safe and reliable power supply for testing activities and eliminates the earlier need to shift Driving Power Cars (DPCs) of DEMU rakes to separate locations for testing.

With the commissioning of the in-house testing facility, unnecessary shunting operations have been



reduced, minimizing time loss and optimizing manpower utilisation.

Officials said the streamlined workflow will enable faster turnaround of DEMU rakes and enhance overall operational efficiency.

In parallel, NFR has undertaken measures to augment and maintain

DEMU rakes to meet growing passenger demand, particularly on short-distance and suburban routes.

The improved maintenance and testing capacity is expected to ensure higher service availability, greater reliability and improved punctuality.

The benefits of the infrastructure push extend beyond railway operations.

Increased DEMU availability will directly support daily commuters, students, small traders and office-goers across Assam and other northeastern states.

Improved rail connectivity is also expected to facilitate access to markets, healthcare and educational institutions, while strengthening integration between remote and semi-urban areas and major railway junctions.

NFR officials said the zone remains committed to adopting modern technology, upgrading workshop capabilities and enhancing passenger services in line with the broader vision of Indian Railways to provide safe, efficient and passenger-friendly transportation.

Through continued infrastructure development and service augmentation, NFR aims to further accelerate regional connectivity and socio-economic growth in the Northeast.

## 4th Inter-College Youth Festival 2025-26 formally begins at Bodoland University

**HT Correspondent**

**KOKRAJHAR, March 2:** The 4th Inter-College Youth Festival 2025-26 was formally inaugurated on Monday at Bodoland University with a flag hoisting ceremony and a vibrant cultural procession, drawing enthusiastic participation from students across the region.

The festival has brought together 1,316 students from 39 affiliated colleges under Bodoland University, creating a lively atmosphere on the university campus.

The event was formally inaugurated by Vice-Chancellor Prof BL Ahuja in the presence of faculty members, dignitaries and hundreds of students.

More than 1,300 students have enrolled to compete in various cultural and literary events, reflecting strong interest and support for the festival.

Addressing the gathering, Prof BL Ahuja warmly welcomed the teachers and managers-in-charge who accompanied and guided the participating students.

He expressed his appreciation at

the overwhelming response and said such events strengthen unity and cultural exchange among colleges.

Academic Registrar and Chairman of the festival, Dr Manjil Basumatary, highlighted the importance of youth platforms in nurturing talent, creativity and leadership qualities among students.

He stated that the festival provides a meaningful space for young minds to express themselves beyond the classroom.

Registrar and Organising Secretary Dr Prahlad Basumatary delivered a motivating address, thanking all participating colleges, managers-in-charge and students for their enthusiastic involvement.

He emphasised that the Youth Festival offers valuable opportunities for students to explore their potential in cultural, artistic and intellectual domains.

The multi-day festival will feature a series of competitions and performances, celebrating the diversity and creative spirit of students from across the Bodoland region and beyond.

# Will 'remove infiltrators from WB' Deletion of their names from rolls made Mamata nervous: Shah

**MATHURAPUR (WB), March 2:** Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Monday sharpened the BJP's "infiltration" pitch, declaring that while "only names are being deleted now" from West Bengal's electoral rolls under the SIR, they would be "removed from the state" once the party comes to power, raising the stakes ahead of the Assembly polls.

Launching the BJP's 'Poriborton Yatra' from Mathurapur in South 24 Parganas, his first visit since the publication of the post-SIR rolls on Saturday, Shah slammed the TMC government over what he described as years of unchecked infiltration under Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's watch, signalling that border security and citizenship will anchor the BJP's final electoral push.

"Right now, only names are being deleted from voter rolls, and Mamata Didi is nervous. Once BJP forms the government, we will identify and remove every infiltrator from Bengal," he said, addressing a gathering in the coastal belt abutting the Sundarbans and close to the porous Indo-Bangladesh frontier.

His remarks came days after the Election Commission's post-SIR rolls recorded 63.66 lakh deletions, 8.3 per cent of the electorate, reducing the voter base to just over 7.04 crore ahead of the 2026 Assembly polls.

More than 60.06 lakh electors have also been placed in the "under adjudication" category, subject to scrutiny in the coming weeks, marking the most sweeping electoral reset in the state since 2002.

For the BJP, which built its Bengal pitch around citizenship and border security since 2019, the revised rolls have provided both validation and velocity.

"TMC has made Bengal a swarg (heaven) for infiltrators," Shah al-



leged, asserting that the border state's security had been compromised by "appeasement politics".

"Bengal is a bordering state. The TMC cannot ensure security because they allow infiltration. Only the BJP can provide security to a bordering state like Bengal," he said. Drawing a calibrated distinction between "infiltrators" and Hindu refugees, a politically sensitive divide in the Matua-dominated refugee belt, Shah sought to reassure Hindu migrants from Bangladesh.

"I want to assure Hindu refugees that not a single refugee will lose their citizenship," he said, reiterating the party's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) plank.

The SIR churn has been sharpest in the Matua belt across North 24 Parganas, Nadia and parts of north Bengal, where community leaders claim nearly 40 per cent of the community has been impacted either through deletions or by 'under adjudication', an assertion that, if validated, could reverberate across 40-50 Assembly seats where the Dalit Hindu refugee bloc anchors the BJP's core vote bank.

The 'Poriborton Yatra', Shah said, was not merely about a

change of chief minister but about "freeing Bengal from infiltrators, corruption and syndicate raj".

"Change means securing our borders. Change means ending corruption in jobs. Change means safety for mothers and sisters. Change means rule of law," he said, repeatedly asking the crowd whether infiltrators should be removed and whether corruption in recruitment should end.

Shah also accused Banerjee of duplicity on religious issues.

"Mamata Banerjee is now busy inaugurating temples as she knows the Hindus are not happy with her. But she is allowing the building of Babri Masjid in Bengal. In a well-crafted conspiracy, she has ensured Humayun Kabir's exit from the party so that he can build the Babri Masjid. This is a nexus between Kabir and Mamata Didi," he alleged.

TMC MLA Kabir had in December last year laid the foundation stone for a mosque — modelled on Ayodhya's Babri Masjid — at Rejinagar in West Bengal's Murshidabad district. He was later expelled from the party.

Besides infiltration, Shah widened the attack surface to cor-

ruption, fiscal stress and alleged dynastic ambitions within the ruling party.

Listing alleged scams — teacher recruitment, municipal appointments, cattle smuggling, PDS ration distribution, MGNREGA and PM Awas — he accused the TMC of institutionalising graft and alleged that several of its leaders had landed in jail.

"And the BJP who provided protection to all these scams is being sent to the Rajya Sabha by Mamata Banerjee," he said, criticising the TMC's decision to nominate former DGP Rajeev Kumar to the Upper House.

Kumar, who retired as the acting Director General of Police of West Bengal in January this year and earlier headed the Kolkata Police, was at the centre of a high-profile confrontation between the state government and central agencies during the CBI probe into the Saradha chit fund case.

"Corruption has become Bengal's identity. Whenever Bengal's name comes up in the country, the first thing that comes to mind is the corrupt TMC government," Shah said.

In a pointed "bhaipo" (nephew) barb aimed at TMC national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee, Shah alleged that the chief minister's real goal was to install her nephew in power.

"If the people here make the mistake of voting again for the TMC, Bengal will have a government run by nephew Abhishek Banerjee and not by Mamata Didi," he said.

"Bring a BJP government," he told the crowd, "and within 45 days we will implement the Seventh Pay Commission for state government employees, fill vacant posts without bribery, ensure security for women, and jail those who killed BJP workers." (PTI)

# Modi-Carney talks: India, Canada seal landmark uranium deal; set USD 50 bn trade target

**NEW DELHI, March 2:** India and Canada on Monday sealed key pacts on supplies of Uranium and critical minerals and vowed to soon conclude a comprehensive economic partnership agreement, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Canadian counterpart Mark Carney finalising a new framework to shore up ties including taking bilateral annual trade to USD 50 billion by 2030.

In their wide-ranging talks, the two leaders also pledged to ramp up cooperation in defence, critical technologies, small and modular nuclear reactors, education and renewable energy as Modi said the relations between the two countries are now filled with new energy, mutual trust and positivity.

Canada is set to support India's civil nuclear energy sector under the USD 2.6 billion uranium supply agreement.

The prime minister said both sides agreed that terrorism, extremism, and radicalisation are common and serious challenges not only for India and Canada but for all humanity. "Our close cooperation against these is crucial for global peace and stability," he said.

Modi and Carney also deliberated on the precarious security situation in West Asia with PM Modi asserting that India supports the resolution of all conflicts through dialogue and diplomacy.

"The current situation in West Asia is a matter of deep concern for us. India supports the resolution of all disputes through dialogue and diplomacy. We will continue to work with all countries to ensure the safety of all Indian citizens in the region," the prime minister said in his media statement.

The major outcomes of the Modi-Carney talks were their decision to expand trade relations, a move that comes amid Canada's increasingly frosty economic ties with the Trump administration.

The fresh move to bolster ties came as part of ongoing efforts by the two sides to reset the relations



that came under severe strain following a diplomatic row over the killing of a Khalistani separatist in 2023.

"Our goal is to reach USD 50 billion in trade by 2030. Unlocking the full potential of economic cooperation is our priority. Therefore, we have decided to finalise the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement soon."

"This will create new investment and employment opportunities in both countries," Modi said.

"Canada's pension funds have invested USD 100 billion in India. This symbolises their deep belief in India's growth story," he said.

The volume of two-way annual trade at present is around USD 13 billion.

The prime minister said the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on critical minerals will strengthen resilient supply chains. Canada is known for its significant reservoir of critical minerals and rare earth materials.

"In the energy sector, we are building a next-generation partnership, which will focus on hydrocarbons as well as renewable energy, green hydrogen and energy storage," Modi said.

"In civil nuclear energy, we have signed a landmark deal for long-term uranium supply. We will also work together on small modular reactors and advanced reactors," he said.

Modi said the growing cooperation between the two countries in

the field of defence and security symbolises the deep mutual trust and the maturity of the relationship.

"We will work to enhance defence industries, maritime domain awareness and military exchanges. To this end, today we have decided to establish the India-Canada defence dialogue," he said.

The prime minister also highlighted the expansion of two-way ties in the education sector.

"New partnerships between several universities in AI, healthcare, agriculture and innovation are being announced. We also agreed on Canadian universities opening campuses in India," he said.

The prime minister also made a mention of how India and Canada share an "unwavering belief" in democratic values.

"We celebrate diversity. The well-being of humanity is our shared vision. This vision inspires us to move forward in every field. Today, we discussed transforming this vision into a next level partnership," he said.

In his remarks, Carney mentioned the future of India-Canada energy ties. "Today, we are launching a strategic energy partnership with significant potential to expand bilateral energy trade. We've signed a new critical minerals partnership spanning development, processing and secure supply chains for clean energy, electric vehicles and advanced manufacturing," he said. (PTI)

## Make appropriate arrangements for Kashi Vishwanath visitors: Adityanath

**VARANASI, March 1:** Expecting a large number of devotees at the Kashi Vishwanath Dham during the upcoming festivals, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Sunday directed the officials concerned to make appropriate arrangements for the visitors, asserting that there should be no complaints of mistreatment by them.

During a visit to Varanasi, Adityanath also directed the officials to ensure access for devotees to the shops built in the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor and emphasised that reasonable prices should be fixed for the goods sold there.

He said religious institutions are not a source of money, but a place of devotion; therefore, better arrangements should be ensured for devotees at these places.

The chief minister reviewed development works, construction projects and law and order during a meeting at the circuit house auditorium, an official statement said. He asked the officials to expedite the construction work at the Manikarnika and Harishchandra

ghats by increasing human resources, emphasising that historical heritage should be protected under all circumstances.

He also directed that a robust passenger boarding and deboarding system be established at the ropeway station under development in Godaulia.

All religious activities should be conducted within the premises of religious sites, Adityanath said, asserting that no new traditions will be permitted.

Adityanath, who is on a two-day visit to Varanasi, visited the Kashi Vishwanath Dham where he performed 'aarti' and offered prayers, the statement said.

The chief minister also inspected a road construction project being carried out under the Chief Minister Green Road Infrastructure Development Scheme (CMGRIDS). Reviewing the progress of the works, he directed the officials to ensure that all projects are completed within the stipulated timeframe, following the prescribed quality standards. (PTI)

## RS polls: Shiv Sena (UBT), Cong jostle for lone winnable seat

**MUMBAI, March 2:** The upcoming Rajya Sabha polls have emerged as a crucial test for the MVA's unity, as both Shiv Sena (UBT) and Congress on Monday staked claim to the alliance's lone winnable seat while insisting that internal talks are ongoing.

Shiv Sena (UBT) MLA Aaditya Thackeray denied any deadlock in the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi's talks for the March 16 polls, asserting that the solo seat should go to his party due to its numerical strength.

The last date for filing nominations for polls to the seven Rajya Sabha seats is March 5. The elections will be held on March 16, and votes will be counted on the same day.

Speaking to PTI, Maharashtra Congress president Harshwardhan Sapkal also stressed that his party is firm on its claim to contest the seat, but said that talks were underway and decisions would be taken after consultations.

Thackeray, in a post on X, said, "There is no deadlock in talks for the Rajya Sabha; all parties are in communication with each other. We have put forward our claim on the upcoming Rajya Sabha seat, as numerically and in terms of the rotation policy fixed for the MVA, the seat should be contested by the @ShivSenaUBT."

Senior party leader Sanjay Raut said discussions within the MVA are on for the lone Rajya Sabha seat ahead of the March 16 polls, but as the single largest Opposition party, the stand of the Shiv Sena UBT will

be crucial to the decision.

Speaking to reporters, Raut said that several leaders, including former MPs Rajan Vichare and Vinayak Raut, have met party chief Uddhav Thackeray to express their desire to contest the Rajya Sabha polls.

Rajan Vichare and Vinayak Raut lost the 2024 Lok Sabha election. "Talks are underway consistently among the constituents, and it will continue till the last minute. Discussion among the prominent leaders of the parties is on," he said.

In April, Rajya Sabha stint will end for NCP (SP) chief Sharad Pawar, Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Priyanka Chaturvedi, Fauzia Khan of NCP (SP), Ramdas Athawale of RPI (Athawale), BJP's Bhagwat Karad, Congress's Rajani Patil and NCP's Dhairysheel Patil.

With numbers heavily stacked in favour of the ruling Mahayuti, the MVA can manage to get only one member elected to the Upper House of Parliament and the legislative council.

However, all three MVA constituents — Shiv Sena (UBT), Congress and NCP (SP) — have staked claim to the sole seat. The Sena (UBT) has 20 MLAs, followed by Congress with 16 and NCP (SP) with 10.

The BJP-led Mahayuti is likely to get six of the seven seats due to their massive strength in the assembly. The names of National Women's Commission chief Vijaya Rahatkar and BJP general secretary Vinod Tawde are doing the rounds, while Union Minister Ramdas Athawale is likely to be renominated from the BJP's quota. (PTI)

## Spl Court order discharging Kejriwal and others in excise case illegal: CBI

**NEW DELHI, March 2:** Challenging the special court order discharging former Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and others in the excise policy case, the CBI has submitted to the Delhi High Court that the order was based "on a selective reading of the prosecution case, disregarding the material showing the culpability of the accused", and was "patently illegal".

In its 974-page petition before the high court, the CBI said the Special Judge essentially conducted a mini-trial dealing with separate limbs of conspiracy in isolation rather than assessing the actions of the accused cumulatively. Terming the order "perverse", the agency said it suffers from "errors apparent on the face", is based on "misreading" of facts and violates the Supreme Court's assertions related to the stage when charges are to be framed. The special court had on Friday discharged Kejriwal, Sisodia and 21 others in the liquor-policy case by refusing to take cognisance of the CBI chargesheet against them. Among the 21 people given a clean chit in the case is Telangana Jagruti president K Kavitha.

Special Judge Jitendra Singh had rapped the CBI for lapses in the investigation, saying there was no cogent evidence against Kejriwal and no prima facie case against Sisodia and the other accused. (PTI)

## Haryana budget proposes 'Agri Discom', 'green climate fund', 20 pc reservation for Agniveers

**CHANDIGARH, March 2:** Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini on Monday presented the budget for 2026-27 with an outlay of ₹ 2.23 lakh crore, with several initiatives including a new electricity distribution company for the agriculture sector, a ₹ 100 crore green climate resilience fund and 20 per cent reservation for Agniveers in the state police force.

Saini also announced setting up of 'Adarsh Pariksha Kendra' on a public-private partnership model, Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) under IG rank police officer, 'Wedding City' each in Gurugram, Kharkhoda and Pinjore on the concept of 'Wed in India', a modern film city at Pinjore, besides stating that Rajiv Gandhi Sports Complex, Daultabad, will be upgraded to the state's first 'Para Sports Stadium'.

Sporting a saffron turban, Saini said 5,000 suggestions were received from various quarters, and these have been incorporated in the budget.

Describing the state budget as the "non-stop government's" 12th budget, Saini said his government has fulfilled 60 out of 217 promises made in his party's poll manifesto. Sharing details of the budget proposals, the chief minister announced a capital expenditure of ₹ 28,205 crore for 2026-27, which is 12.6 per cent of the total allocation.



In his over three-hour-long budget address, Saini said the World Bank has approved ₹ 2,716 crore of financial assistance for the 'Haryana Clean Air Project'.

The chief minister announced a 20 per cent reservation in recruitment to various posts in Haryana Police for 'Agniveers' returning after service in the Indian Army.

In addition, special recruitment of 1,300 Agniveers in Haryana Police will also be undertaken next year, said Saini.

"To strengthen the state's disaster preparedness, I propose the formation of the Haryana State Disaster Response Force comprising 1,149 personnel. Maximum participation of Agniveers will be ensured in it," he said.

Saini also informed the House that the government of India has

recently strengthened MGNREGA by launching it as the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajevika Mission (Gramin) (VBGRAM G). "I have made a provision of ₹ 610 crore for 125 days of wage-based employment guarantee annually to every rural family in Haryana," he said.

Among new proposals, the budget proposed setting up a 'Haryana Agri Discom' — a third power distribution company aimed to ensure faster release of connections and reliable and uninterrupted electricity supply for farmers.

"This will serve all 5,084 agricultural feeders and 7.12 lakh agricultural consumers across Haryana. This initiative will ensure uninterrupted power supply to every farm and significantly accel-

erate services, from providing new tubewell connections to replacement of faulty transformers," he said. This initiative will prove to be a milestone in enhancing farmers' income, he noted.

The chief minister also proposed the setting up of the 'Haryana Green Climate Resilience Fund' with an initial provision of ₹ 100 crore which is in line with the goal of net-zero emissions by 2070.

This fund will accelerate investments in zero-emission vehicles, renewable energy, energy efficiency, water conservation, urban greening, climate-resilient agriculture, and nature-based solutions across the state. Saini also proposed setting up 'Adarsh Pariksha Kendra' in every assembly constituency under a public-private partnership (PPP) model.

The first such Kendra will be established in Kurukshetra by December 25, 2026, he informed the House. On the agriculture front, Saini said last year, under the "Mera Pani-Meri Virasat Yojana", his government gave an incentive of ₹ 8,000 per acre to those farmers who gave up paddy cultivation.

"In 2026-27, I propose to provide an additional bonus of ₹ 2,000 per acre to such farmers who choose to cultivate pulses, oilseeds, and cotton in place of paddy," he said. (PTI)

## Iran Supreme Leader's killing Protests across UP as people mourn Khamenei, slam US-Israel nexus

**LUCKNOW, March 1:** Large-scale protests led by Shia Muslims broke out in various districts of Uttar Pradesh, including the state capital Lucknow, on Sunday to condemn the killing of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in a joint US-Israeli attack.

Terming Khamenei's 'martyrdom' a huge loss to humanity and the silencing of a strong voice for their rights, the protesters held a demonstration at the Chhotta Imbarara in Lucknow to condemn the "cowardly act" of the US and Israel.

Police said the gatherings were peaceful with no untoward incidents reported from anywhere in the state.

On Sunday evening, a large group of protesters took out a candlelight march from the Chhotta Imbarara to the Bada Imbarara in Lucknow.

Samajwadi Party spokesperson Abbas Haidar, who was at the protest site, told PTI Videos, "This (killing Khamenei) is an act of cowardice by the US and Israel. People who are peace-loving and have faith in justice are deeply pained."

The chairman of the Lucknow Islamic Centre, Maulana Khalid Rasheed Firangi Mahali, told PTI, "The way Iran has been attacked is deeply concerning. Iran is a sovereign, independent country, and the attack by Israel and the US violated all international laws and demonstrated extreme brutality."

"We strongly condemn the killing of Ayatollah Khamenei, who had the full authority to defend his country. We feel the international community, including the United Nations, should intervene in this matter to stop this war immediately."

Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei, who was widely respected by the Shia community, was killed in an airstrike in Tehran early Saturday during a joint Israel-US attack on Iran.

Iranian state television and the state-run IRNA news agency announced the 86-year-old's death early Sunday, triggering a wave of protests and mourning across the world, including India.

According to reports coming from Jaunpur, angry protesters, including women, took out a march from the Imbarara at Pandariba in the Kotwali area, holding placards with anti-US and anti-Israel slogans.

Shia cleric Maulana Mohammad Raza, who took part in the march, said the way the US attacked and

killed Khamenei exposed its "true identity" before the entire world.

The protesters also prayed for the safety of the people of Iran and demanded appropriate security measures for Indians living in the Middle East.

In Aligarh, a large number of people gathered near the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) and held a demonstration against the attack on Khamenei.

The protesters, who were joined by many students from the AMU, submitted a memorandum addressed to the president of India, demanding that India express its clear protest against the brutal killing of dozens of schoolchildren in Iran by the US military.

In southern Iran, at least 85 people were reported killed when a girls' school was struck, and dozens more were wounded, the local governor told the Iranian state TV on Saturday.

Former AMU student leader Mehboob Alam told reporters, "Ayatollah Khamenei was not only the spiritual leader of the Shia community but also the voice of all those who stood against the imperialist forces posing a serious threat to world peace. His death is a grave loss to humanity."

Around 200 km away in Muzaffarnagar, thousands of Shia Muslims marched with Khamenei's photographs from Kidwai Nagar to Fakharshah Chowk, and submitted a memorandum to the district magistrate addressed to the president of India.

Shia cleric Asad Raza Hussaini said, "We condemn the brutal assassination of Ayatollah Khamenei in Iran."

In Meerut, members of the Shia sect, including women and children, staged protests at Abdullahpur, Railway Road, Mansabiya and Zaidi Farm, mourning the killing of Iran's supreme leader.

Prayer meetings were also held at the Imam Bargah Panjtanai and Darbar-e-Hussaini in Zaidi Farm.

A similar protest was witnessed in Jhansi, where a large number of Shia Muslims gathered at Masjid-e-Imamiya in Mewatipura to mourn the killing of Khamenei, calling it an attack on world peace.

Cleric Haider Zaidi said, "Our community opposes any form of oppression. The military action (in Iran) is a form of bullying and against humanity. We will continue to raise our voice in a non-violent manner."

Reports of protests also came from Ambedkar Nagar, Rampur, Barabanki, Shahjahanpur and Ghaziabad. (PTI)

# 'The public must know the good work done by the police'

## Arunachal CM pushes for strong internal security, tech policing

ITANAGAR, March 2: Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu on Monday emphasised the requirement of strong internal security, technology-driven policing, and a conviction-oriented criminal justice delivery system.

Addressing the inaugural session of the state-level conference of Superintendents of Police (SPs) and Commandants at DK Convention Centre here, Khandu stressed the need to strengthen cyber capabilities and digital forensics, as technology has become the future of policing, according to an official report.

He also underlined the need to activate official social media platforms of the police department to enhance public awareness and transparency.

Suggesting the formation of a dedicated social media team under the DGP, he advised SPs to use official platforms responsibly.

"The public must know the good work done by the police. Social media should be used for official communication, not personal purposes," he said.

Addressing border management, the chief minister observed that Arunachal Pradesh, the largest state in the Northeast, shares international boundaries with Bhutan and Myanmar and Tibet.

He called for correct official references in correspondence and emphasised vigilance along the Myanmar border, particularly in Tirap, Changlang, and Longding districts, where extortion and drug trafficking linked to cross-border insurgent influence remain concerns.

"We do not have a hometown



insurgency. Whatever challenges exist, we must take ownership and resolve them. We cannot remain dependent on the government of India for everything. It is our state, and we must rectify our issues," he said.

He commended the Arunachal Pradesh Police for neutralising attempts to revive insurgency under the name of United Tani Army and called for strengthening the Special Task Force, enhancing training and manpower, and improving coordination with central armed forces, including Assam Rifles.

Acknowledging the state's tribal diversity, Khandu advised officers to understand the unique social pulse of each region.

"Inclusive governance requires structured dialogue with stakeholders. Arunachal's diversity is its strength, but we must understand local sensitivities," he noted.

On the issue of illegal immigration, Khandu said that the Inner Line Permit system under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation,

1873, is being technologically upgraded and will soon be launched in a digital format across the state. He emphasized the need to check illegal immigration proactively in the coming days.

The CM described the new criminal laws -- Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, and Bharatiya Sakshya Adhinyam -- as a transformative shift in India's criminal justice system.

He congratulated the state police for achieving 100 per cent training coverage and rolling out initiatives such as e-Suraksha, e-Summons, ICJS integration, Nyay Shrutu, and deployment of mobile forensic vans.

Khandu, however, emphasised the urgent need to move from arrest-oriented to conviction-oriented policing.

"Arrests alone are not enough. Our conviction rate is reportedly around 30 per cent. We must coordinate with the law and judiciary departments to understand why

convictions are low and address the gaps," he said, calling for joint brainstorming among police, law, and judicial departments.

He sought the strengthening of the State Forensic Science Laboratory, including manpower augmentation.

Highlighting the importance of internal security in the journey towards a developed Arunachal, the chief minister called for greater focus on modern criminal justice systems, AI-driven policing, cyber security, narcotics control, and women and child safety.

The chief minister lauded the achievements of Arunachal Pradesh Police, including the structured implementation of new criminal laws, the destruction of around 16,000 acres of illicit poppy and cannabis cultivation, the registration of hundreds of NDPS cases, major narcotics seizures, and the dismantling of an inter-state vehicle theft syndicate.

"Arunachal has transformed significantly in the last decade. The Police department has also received substantial support from the government, and we will continue to strengthen it further," he assured. He added that recommendations emerging from the conference would be backed by financial allocations in the upcoming budget.

Reiterating that peace and stability remain the top priorities, Khandu urged all officers to submit compliance reports on time and to conduct similar orientation meetings at district levels to ensure that conference outcomes are implemented effectively at the grassroots. (PTI)

## Arunachal Deputy CM Mein says public suggestions will shape state Budget plans

ITANAGAR, March 2: Arunachal Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein on Monday said the state government's pre-Budget consultations with community-based organisations are aimed at ensuring that public suggestions directly shape planning and investment decisions, asserting that governance must be 'responsive' and result-oriented.

"Chaired a Pre-Budget consultative meeting with our community-based organisations. This is not a routine exercise, but a sincere effort to listen, assess best practices, review gaps, and ensure that public suggestions are reflected in our planning and investment decisions," Mein said in a post on X, after the meeting.

Emphasising accountability in governance, he stated that governance must be responsive, and every consultation must lead to action.

Mein, who also holds the Finance, Planning and Investment portfolios, said the interaction yielded "valuable insights" on charting a focused and sustainable growth path for the state.

"The interaction provided valuable insights on how we can move Arunachal Pradesh forward in a focused and sustainable manner," he said.

Outlining the government's core priorities, the deputy chief minister said that the priorities of the state government remain clear: empowering the youth,

strengthening women's participation, improving healthcare and education, and ensuring balanced infrastructure development.

He observed that Arunachal Pradesh has made significant strides in the past decade but stressed the need for continued institutional strengthening and measurable outcomes.

"Over the past decade, our state has witnessed significant progress, but we must continue to streamline departments, improve performance indicators, and ensure results are visible on the ground," Mein added.

The meeting also deliberated on long-term initiatives aimed at leveraging the state's cultural wealth for economic growth.

"We also discussed forward-looking initiatives, including the development of heritage and cultural tourism models to preserve our rich traditions while creating economic opportunities," Mein said.

Expressing gratitude to the participating organisations, Mein said their inputs would play a crucial role in shaping the state's future roadmap.

"I sincerely thank all participating organisations for their constructive suggestions. Together, through unity and collective vision, we will continue building a stronger and more prosperous Arunachal Pradesh," he added. (PTI)

## Mizoram Home Minister warns refugees against illegal trade

AIZAWL, March 2: Mizoram Home Minister K Sapdanga on Monday told the state Assembly that some refugees taking shelter in the northeastern state are engaging in illegal commercial activities, with some individuals already facing serious legal charges.

He said that the government is taking a stern view of such refugees.

Responding to questions during the ongoing budget session, Sapdanga said that while the government has not received "official reports," it is aware that some refugees are covertly conducting small-scale businesses in violation of the law.

"Authorities are actively investigating these cases and have made several arrests, with some individuals facing very serious criminal cases depending on the nature of the goods being sold or transported," the Home minister said.

Providing an update on the state's biometric enrollment process, Sapdanga said that a total of 26,381 refugees from Myanmar have been enrolled as of February 5, while 1,974 people are yet to be registered.

Mizoram currently hosts more than 38,000 refugees from Myanmar and Bangladesh, as well as internally displaced people (IDPs) from neighbouring Manipur.

The refugees, as well as IDPs from Manipur, are mostly ethnic Zo communities, who share close ethnic and cultural ties with the Mizos.

Although the government has plans for designated settlements or relief camps, they remain difficult to implement effectively, according to Sapdanga.



"They (refugees) arrived in Mizoram out of extreme fear and hardship. They can't always stay where the government desires, nor can they always stay where they themselves wish. They are scattered wherever they can find space, some in schools, and others with relatives," he said.

"While we have plans for designated settlement, they are often impossible to implement fully. It is a struggle for the planners as well as for the refugees themselves," the Home minister added.

The Myanmar nationals, mostly from the Chin state, fled to Mizoram following a military coup in the neighbouring country in February 2021, while the asylum seekers belonging to ethnic Bawm tribe, one of the Mizo tribes, from Bangladesh's Chittagang Hill Tracts came to the state after a military offensive against an ethnic insurgent group in 2022.

The Kuki-Zomi-Hmar group from Manipur fled to Mizoram following the ethnic violence in May, 2023. (PTI)

## Nagaland govt working on constituting interim council for FNTA: Bhalla

KOHIMA, March 2: Nagaland Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla on Monday said the state government is working on constituting the interim council for Frontier Nagaland Territorial Authority (FNTA) in consultation with ENPO and tribal hohos of eastern Nagaland.

Delivering his maiden address on the opening day of the Budget Session 2026-27 of the Nagaland Legislative Assembly, the governor said the state would soon move for enactment of special legislation for the constitution of the FNTA in consultation with the Ministry of Home Affairs, as provided in the Memorandum of Agreement signed on February 5, 2026.

Bhalla extended greetings to members at the commencement of the 8th Session of the Fourteenth Assembly and expressed confidence that the House would uphold the highest democratic standards during its deliberations.

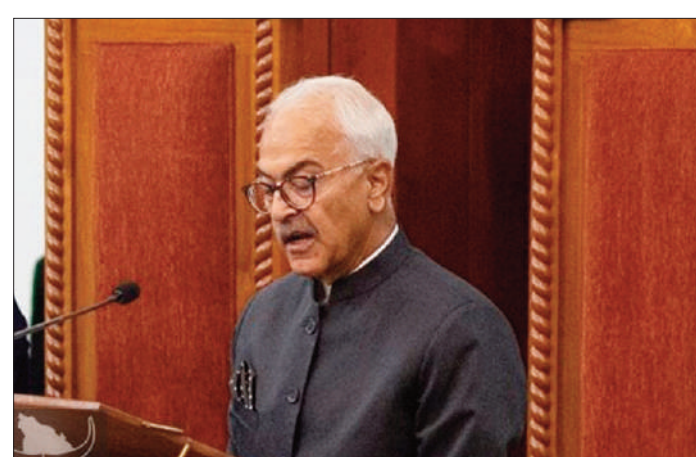
Referring to the Naga political issue, Bhalla reiterated the government's commitment to an early and honourable settlement. He highlighted the constitution of a Political Affairs Committee (PAC) comprising ministers, elected representatives of all tribes, leaders of political parties and Members of Parliament from the state to facilitate dialogue.

A sub-committee has also been formed to streamline the process, he said.

He informed the House that the chief minister, along with cabinet colleagues and members of the PAC sub-committee, recently met Union Home Minister Amit Shah to seek the appointment of a political-level interlocutor to expedite the ongoing peace talks.

On the census exercise, Bhalla said India's decennial census, formally notified on June 16, will be conducted in two phases. In Nagaland, the first phase will be house listing and housing census to be carried out from July 1 to July 30 this year, with self-enumeration available from June 16 to June 30. He urged members to extend full cooperation to ensure its smooth conduct in the state.

Touching on law and order, the governor commended the district



administration, police and security forces for maintaining peace and appreciated the support of tribal bodies and civil society organisations.

He said sustained enforcement under the NDPS Act in 2025 led to the registration of 157 cases and arrest of 260 persons. The state police have strengthened its cyber-crime response through a dedicated Cyber Crime Cell and the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal.

He also informed that new Superintendent of Police offices at Shamator, Niuland, Wokha and Noklak have been completed and inaugurated, while the Ministry of Home Affairs has sanctioned the installation of over 1,400 AI-enabled ANPR and CCTV cameras in Dimapur and Kohima to further bolster surveillance and tackle drug trafficking.

The governor also outlined key achievements and future priorities across sectors while addressing the House, stressing human resource development, infrastructure expansion and fiscal growth.

In education, he said nearly 3,900 teachers have been trained under the Nagaland Education Project-NECTAR through Professional Learning Communities as part of the implementation of NEP 2020, while 17 Lighthouse School Complexes have adopted school transformation strategies. Infrastructure upgrades in government colleges are underway under PM-USHA, and the Nagaland Scholarship Nodal Cell has been launched

to streamline disbursement.

Under the Chief Minister Health Insurance Scheme, combined claim payouts have exceeded ₹ 389 crore, benefiting over 1.1 lakh individuals. The State Drugs Testing Laboratory has been operationalised in Kohima to strengthen drug regulation, he said.

In rural development, over 3.41 lakh functional household tap connections have been provided under Jal Jeevan Mission, covering 94 per cent of households. More than 2.38 lakh farmers have benefited under PM-KISAN, receiving ₹ 770 crore through DBT, he said.

Horticulture, livestock, fisheries and natural farming initiatives are being expanded to boost incomes, Bhalla said.

The governor also informed that road projects under CRIF and NESIDS have been completed, while work on the Foothill Road is 70 per cent complete, while a 220/132/33 KV substation at Tsitrong is under construction to improve power supply.

GST collections stood at ₹987.38 crore as of January 31, registering 37 per cent growth, the highest in the country, he said.

The state has also initiated preparation of the "Viksit Nagaland @2047" vision document to align with national development goals.

Meanwhile, Bhalla expressed confidence that the deliberations in this session will further strengthen the resolve of the Government to create a more prosperous and developed Nagaland in every respect. (PTI)

## Arunachal CM Khandu eyes Spotify tie-up to spotlight local talent

ITANAGAR, March 2: Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu on Monday said the state government is looking forward to meaningful collaboration with Spotify India to amplify local artistic talent and take the music of Arunachal Pradesh to a global audience.

"An immense pleasure to warmly welcome representatives of Spotify India - Music & Podcast team," Khandu posted on X after meeting the delegation.

Highlighting the transformative role of digital streaming platforms in the music industry, the chief minister stated that platforms like Spotify have revolutionised how music is discovered, shared, and monetised. He emphasised that such platforms have created unprecedented opportunities for creators, particularly those from remote and culturally rich regions

like Arunachal Pradesh.

"It has empowered independent artists, regional musicians, and young creators to reach global audiences without barriers," Khandu said. The chief minister underscored the importance of leveraging digital platforms to showcase the rich and diverse musical heritage of the state, expressing optimism about future partnerships. "We look forward to meaningful collaboration with Spotify to amplify the voices of our artists and take the music of Arunachal to the world," he added.

The proposed collaboration is expected to open new avenues for local musicians and content creators, positioning Arunachal Pradesh's vibrant cultural expressions on international platforms, officials said. (PTI)

## Nearly 90-minute lunar eclipse viewing expected in Shillong today: IMD

SHILLONG, March 2: Residents of Meghalaya are set to witness the concluding phase of a total lunar eclipse on Tuesday evening, with the northeastern state expected to get a clearer view of the celestial event compared to most parts of the country.

In Shillong, moonrise is expected at 5.23 pm, while the totality phase will end at 5.33 pm. However, the full eclipse will conclude at 6.48 pm, giving observers a viewing window of about one hour and 25 minutes from moonrise, IMD officials said on Monday.

India Meteorological Department (IMD) officials added that weather conditions are likely to remain favourable for viewing in most parts of Meghalaya. "According to the current forecast, we expect gen-

erally clear to partly cloudy skies over Shillong and adjoining areas on Tuesday evening. This should allow people to witness the eclipse without major weather-related obstruction," an IMD official told PTI.

Another official said visibility would largely depend on localised cloud cover at the time of moonrise.

"If the eastern horizon remains clear around sunset, residents will be able to see the moon emerging from the Earth's shadow with its characteristic reddish hue," the official added. While most parts of India will see only the final stages of the eclipse, Meghalaya and other northeastern states are better positioned to observe the end of the totality phase due to their geographical location. (PTI)

## Nagaland teachers' agitation on; govt rules out salary shift to state plan

KOHIMA, March 2: The agitation by the Nagaland Government Teachers Association (NGTA) entered its third day on Monday, with protesting teachers reiterating that they will not call off their stir until their demands are addressed by the state government.

Advisor for School Education and SCERT Kekhriehoulie Yhame said the government remains open to dialogue but will not bypass established procedures or legal provisions. The protesting teachers, largely from the RMSA 2010 and 2013 batches, are demanding that their salaries be shifted to the State Plan. Yhame said such a move would have major financial implications and could lead to the State losing over ₹80 crore in central assistance.

Meanwhile, 2,293 teachers continued their protest outside the Directorate of School Education and stated that they would not move unless their demand is fulfilled.



The Advisor referred to the ad hoc teachers' 2015 batch, stating that 2,483 tutors had been regularised despite being appointed without open recruitment. Of them, around 1,166 are currently part of the agitation, while only 235 have submitted the required

documents for scrutiny by the Personnel & Administrative Reforms (PNR) Department. So far, about 100 cases have been cleared.

Citing a Supreme Court ruling, Yhame said regularisation must comply with legal norms and due process. Teachers have been asked

to submit appointment orders, academic certificates, medical fitness documents and other records for verification, he said, adding that those found with fake or invalid documents would face termination and recovery of salaries.

The Advisor expressed concern that continued protests were affecting government school students, particularly those from economically weaker sections. He appealed to teachers to return to classrooms, warning that prolonged absence without leave could attract disciplinary action, including service breaks.

While acknowledging that some demands are "reasonable," Yhame maintained that no decision would be taken under pressure and that all matters must follow the rule of law. Asked how the department is managing the absence of the teachers, he said that while schools are facing a shortage, the available teachers are running the affairs. (PTI)

## Two Bangladeshis arrested in Meghalaya's West Jaintia Hills

SHILLONG, March 2: Two Bangladeshis were arrested in Meghalaya's West Jaintia Hills district for entering Indian territory without any valid travel documents, police said on Monday.

The two Bangladeshis have been identified as Monirul Biswas and Lovely Khatun, both residents of Bhombag village in Narail district under Khulna division of Bangladesh, they said.

They were intercepted at around 8.30 pm from a vehicle by personnel from Dawki police station. The driver, Pynshabha Khaji of Wahsarang village in East Jaintia Hills district, was also apprehended on suspicion of facilitating their illegal entry and onward travel from Dawki, according to police.

A case has been registered at Dawki police station under Immigration and Foreigners Act, 2025.

West Jaintia Hills Superintendent of Police Jagpal Dhanoa Singh said the arrests were made during routine night patrolling.

"Our patrolling team intercepted the vehicle at around 8.30 pm last night. Upon verification, two Bangladeshi nationals were found without valid travel documents. The driver is suspected to have facilitated their illegal entry and onward movement from Dawki. All three have been arrested, and further investigation is underway," Singh told PTI.

The accused will be produced before the Judicial Magistrate First Class (JMFC) court in Amlarem, police said. (PTI)

## COPU reviews Arunachal state PSUs in second sitting

ITANAGAR, March 2: The Committee on Public Undertakings (COPU) of Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly held its second sitting here on Monday.

The meeting was chaired by Tali MLA Jikke Tako.

The committee scrutinised issues related to Arunachal Pradesh Forest Corporation Limited and Arunachal Pradesh Mineral Development and Trading Corporation Limited, as flagged in the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report.

MLAs Chakat Aboh, Ratu Tech, Oken Tayeng, and Ealing Talang attended the meeting.

Senior Deputy Accountant General, Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly (APLA) Secretary Tadar Meena, APLA Additional Secretary Agaab Mossang and APLA Under Secretary Kheto Lowang were also present. (PTI)

# I DREW A LOT FROM MY UNCLE FOR 'IKKIS' CHARACTER: VIVAAN SHAH

Actor Vivaan Shah says it was a blessing to portray a real life character like Captain Vijendra Malhotra in filmmaker Sriram Raghavan's war drama "Ikkis" and a significant part of his performance was inspired by his uncle, retired Lieutenant General Zameeruddin Shah.

In the critically-acclaimed war drama, which centres on India's youngest Param Vir Chakra awardee Arun Khetrapal who was martyred during the 1971 Indo-Pak war, Shah played his sharp and composed senior officer, Captain Malhotra. His performance has been lauded for offering a counterpoint to Khetrapal's raw intensity as a battle-ready greenhorn officer.

Shah, son of veteran actors Naseeruddin Shah and Ratna Pathak Shah, said he has always been enamoured by his uncle's dynamic and formidable personality.

"I based the character, a great deal of it, on my father's older brother, Lieutenant General Zameeruddin Shah, who actually fought in the Battle of Longewala.

"He's a very dynamic personality. And I really sort of drew on that a great deal and also from the real-life Captain Vijendra Malhotra, who himself was an extraordinarily charismatic person. I never, of course, got to meet him, unfortunately. But I studied his photographs and the information available," Shah told PTI in an interview.

The film, which recently started streaming on Prime Video following its release in theatres in January, features Agastya Nanda, Dharmendra and Jaideep Ahlawat.

The actor said while he tried his best to authentically depict Malhotra in a "truthful and honest" manner, a lot of it required him to fill in with his imagination.

"This is the first time I've really got to play a really dynamic, smart and cool figure. And that, for me, was a real blessing. That was one of the great joys of playing Captain Vijay Malhotra," he said.

The film will always hold a special place in his filmography as it marks his first collaboration with Sriram Raghavan, a filmmaker he has long admired.

Yet the experience also comes with a regret - the actor couldn't meet Dharmendra, his father's favourite hero who passed away at the age of 89 in November last year.

In the film, Dharmendra portrays Khetrapal's father, retired Brigadier Madan Lal Khetrapal, who years after his son's death travels to Pakistan to visit his ancestral village in Sargodha.

"Our storylines didn't intersect. They almost took place in two parallel timelines in a sense. And it's one of the great regrets of my life that I didn't get to meet Dharmendraji, who's one of my heroes and who's also a hero for my father because my father grew up watching his films in the early 60s, from 'Haqeeqat' and 'Phool Aur Pathar' to so many of the wonderful films in the early 60s. Dharmendraji, to my father, was really a sort of Herculean figure, a screen idol, as it were," Shah said.

In fact, Naseeruddin Shah had penned a moving tribute for the late cinema icon after his death.

Shah said his parents really loved the movie, his performance and its anti-war theme.

"They really liked that I played a different kind of character and they really loved the film... It's an anti-war film, essentially it's a humane film. And that's what really touched their hearts very deeply about the film," he said, adding that Dharmendra's final scene in the movie deeply moved his father.

"It hit him emotionally, it was very cathartic because it somehow also serves as a very nice goodbye to Dharmendraji. We didn't know that he's going to... His last lines in the film are 'Rab rakha'," he said.

Shah said every time he watches the film, he is surprised by the emotional intensity of the story.

"The primary attraction for me was the opportunity to work with Sriram Raghavan sir and to be a part of such a beautiful story. Of course, the fact that it was a film with such a beautiful theme. I wouldn't call it a message because art should ideally not have a message. It should be more than that because otherwise it runs the risk of becoming didactic."

Shah said while Nanda and many of the other



young actors went through a full-fledged NDA training, he went to the Armoured Corps Centre in Maharashtra's Ahmednagar for a basic training with the tank crew.

"We basically did PT, drills, march past, a lot of military activities, also a radio communication class, understanding how the nuts and bolts of a tank works. Also there is this thing called a tank simulator which is a sort of computerized mechanism by which you can understand how to fire a tank, how to aim, how to reload, how to shoot again.

"We got to drive a real tank which was one of the most surreal experiences. When I was driving the real tank, I was literally pinching myself to see if this is a dream or if it's actually happen-

ing."

While many believe Raghavan, known for his mastery in thrillers such as "Ek Hasina Thi", "Johnny Gaddaar", "Badlapur" and "Andhadhun", has taken a different path by telling a real life story with "Ikkis", Shah wouldn't necessarily call it a departure.

Comparing the filmmaker with great American directors like Samuel Fuller, Anthony Mann, Don Siegel, Robert Aldrich, Sam Peckinpah and John Sturges, the actor said "Ikkis" is a logical extension to Raghavan's filmography.

"A lot of people feel that it is a departure for Sriram sir but it's not... These filmmakers were the architects of the genre of film noir.

"Film noir is a genre which is primarily asso-

ciated with Sriram sir in our cinema. Now those filmmakers, they were all World War II combat veterans. They made film noirs, crime films, gangster films, westerns and they also all made war films. So in a sense, Sriram sir is continuing on a beautiful tradition of filmmakers."

Shah, who has already worked with filmmakers like Anurag Kashyap ("Bombay Velvet") and Vishal Bhardwaj ("7 Khoon Maaf") and series "Charlie Chopra", said he has always believed in the popular saying -- "an actor does not always select the films, the films select the actor".

"There are certain kinds of films that I do want to do. But I'm not presumptuous enough to think that I might get those films. I would just like to do those roles," he said. (PTI)

## PRIME VIDEO SETS MARCH 13 PREMIERE FOR 'ASPIRANTS' SEASON THREE

Streaming service Prime Video on Monday announced that the third season of its acclaimed Hindi drama series "Aspirants", produced by The Viral Fever (TVF), will premiere on the platform on March 13.

Actors Naveen Kasturia, Shivankit Singh Parihar, Abhilash Thapliyal, Sunny Hinduja, Namita Dubey, and Tengam Celine reprise their roles from previous seasons, with Jatin Goswami joining the cast as a new addition.

The series, directed by Deepesh Sumitra Jagdish, will stream exclusively on Prime Video in India and across more than 240 countries and territories worldwide, a press release said.

"Aspirants" is about three friends, Abhilash, Guri and SK, as they prepare for the UPSC civil services examination in Delhi's Old Rajinder Nagar.

Moving between their struggling student years and their present-day lives, the series explores friendship, ambition, failure and the emotional toll of tying one's identity to a single high-stakes exam. Season three will follow IAS officer Abhilash (Kasturia) across two timelines.

"In the present, an inquiry is initiated against him following allegations made by ALC Sandeep Ohlan, putting his personal relationships with Deepa, Guri, Dhairya, SK, and Sandeep under strain while disrupting his professional goals against a new rival.

"In the past, after qualifying for the IRS, a young Abhilash

chooses to prepare for the IAS one final time from Mukherjee Nagar, navigating new friendships and rivalries," read the official logline. Manish Menghani, Director and Head, Content Licensing, Amazon Prime Video India, said "Aspirants" had built an enduring connection with audiences through its portrayal of aspiration, ambition, and responsibility.

"Our longstanding collaboration with The Viral Fever has allowed us to nurture this story with passion over multiple seasons, and we are delighted to bring the next chapter of Aspirants to audiences across India and beyond," he added.

Vijay Koshy, President and Business Head at TVF, said the new season allows the team to explore a crucial stage of Abhilash's life, as personal and professional challenges test him in new ways.

"At its core, Aspirants has always been about the choices that shape a person's journey... Through dual timelines, we revisit Abhilash's final attempt at the

IAS examination while in the present he deals with the consequences of the path he has chosen. We are grateful to Prime Video for continuing to support the series and helping it reach audiences globally," he said.

"Aspirants" first premiered on YouTube in 2021 before its second season moved to Prime Video in 2023.

The series has been widely praised for its realistic portrayal of civil services aspirants and the pressures of competitive examinations in India. (PTI)



## Suriya's next Tamil movie is titled 'Vishwanath & Sons', film to release in July

Tamil superstar Suriya's upcoming film has been titled "Vishwanath & Sons", the makers announced on Monday. Production banner Sithara Entertainments unveiled the first look of the project directed by Venky Atluri of "Lucky Baskhar" fame.

The film, which is Suriya's 46th project as a lead actor, is billed as a family drama and is slated to release in theatres in July.

"Power in his presence. Warmth in his embrace. Bringing back the vintage magic of @actorsuriya in a heart-touching family spectacle.

#VishwanathAndSons - The biggest family drama of the year arrives this July," the studio posted on Instagram.

The poster features Suriya carrying a smiling baby in his arms, hinting at an emotional narrative centred around familial bonds.

Actor Mamitha Baiju, known for her work in "Premalu", stars opposite Suriya in the film. The ensemble cast also includes



Raveena Tandon, Radhika Sarathkumar, Bhavani Sre and Bjorn Surrao in pivotal roles.

The project is jointly produced by Naga Vamsi and Sai Soujanya. Music for the film is composed by G V Prakash Kumar, while cinematography is handled by Nimish Ravi.

According to media reports, the story is said to revolve around the relationship between a middle-aged man and a young girl, exploring themes of family and emotional connection. (PTI)

## CLASSICAL STALWARTS, YOUNG TALENT TO SHARE STAGE AT SSMFL 2026

The 'Shriram Shankarlal Music Festival' (SSMFL) will return to the national capital on March 6 at the Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra Open Air Arena, continuing its over seven-decade-old legacy of presenting Indian classical music with rigour and restraint.

Founded in 1947 by Sumitra Charat Ram, the three-day festival has long been regarded as a benchmark of artistic integrity, hosting stalwarts such as Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan, Bismillah Khan and MS Subbulakshmi, among others.

The 2026 edition will feature a mix of senior and emerging artists.

"In recent years, we have witnessed a marked rise in rasikas and young listeners travelling from across Delhi NCR, other parts of India, and visitors from abroad to attend the SSMFL.

"What was once largely a Delhi gathering has evolved into a true cultural convergence -- attracting scholars, discerning patrons, and international audiences seeking an immersive experience of Indian classical music in its most authentic form," said Gauri Keeling, vice-chairperson of Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra.

The line-up for the upcoming edition includes Ramana Balachandran, Siddhartha Belmannu and Tejendra Narayan Majumdar on the opening day; Sawani Shende, Shashank Subramanyam and a guru-shishya presentation by Sajan Mishra and Swaransh on day two.

A special morning session on March 8 will present Madhup Mudgal and Biswajit Roy Chowdhury, while the festival will conclude in the evening with performances by Lokesh Anand, Shashwati Mandal and the star-tabla duo of Ustad Shahid Parvez Khan and Pt Anindo Chatterjee. Performances begin at 6 pm daily, with the Sunday morning session at 10 am.

The festival will come to a close on March 8. (PTI)

## Got into acting accidentally: Actor-director Mahesh Manjrekar

Actor-filmmaker Mahesh Manjrekar says he never planned an acting career, but once he discovered theatre, his passion grew so deep that he no longer turns down a compelling role -- whether on stage or in a film.

It all started with amateur one-act plays in 1975, said the actor-director, adding that his interest grew after he attended acting workshops by his neighbour Jaydev Hattangadi, a popular theatre personality.

"I accidentally got into acting, I had never thought of it as a profession. The housing society where I used to live had yearly functions and all of us would act in plays. Rohini Hattangadi and Jaydev Hattangadi were my neighbours," Manjrekar told PTI in an interview.

"When Jaydev came back from NSD, many people, like Om Puri and Naseeruddin Shah, would frequently visit his house. They along with Jaydev would conduct an acting workshop before a play. I found it interesting and considered doing Jaydev's workshop. That's how the love for theatre developed," he said.

Manjrekar made his commercial debut in 1984 with the play "Aflatoon" alongside Sachin Khedekar and Sunil Barve.

"There were great actors like

Dr. Shreeram Lagoo, and many others and it was a little difficult for us to get into commercial theatre," he said, adding that he later started his own theatre group, 'Ashwami Theatre Group', in 1988 and produced acclaimed plays such as "Dr Tumhisuddha", "Dhyanimani" and "All the Best", among others.

In 1992, Manjrekar acted in the Marathi film "Jeeva Sakha" and TV show "Kshitij Ye Nahi".

Four years later, he pivoted from acting to focus on direction, and made his directorial debut with the cult classic, "Vaastav: The Reality" (1999) starring Sanjay Dutt.

"I did theatre till 1996. But then acting took a backseat as I became interested in direction. I got into direction with 'Vaastav'. I never thought I would act again, but then 'Kaante' brought me back into acting. So, whenever there's something interesting, I take it up.

"Also, I always thought about returning to theatre. I had many film work commitments but then I did a play, 'Shankar Jaykisan', which opened last December and now 'Animal' happened, both are quite interesting," Manjrekar, who has acted in both Hindi and Marathi films such as "Wanted", "White Tiger", "Dashavatar" and



"Me Shivajiraje Bhosale Boltoy", said.

The 67-year-old actor-director is currently thrilled about his solo play titled, "Animal", which he directed, wrote, and even acted in.

"It's a solo act so I don't have to depend on anybody but then I feel it is daunting and liberating at the same time," he added.

"Animal" follows the story of

Dattu, a man from a small town near Pandharpur, Maharashtra, who arrives in Mumbai chasing the promise of stardom. What begins as faith in the city and belief in himself gradually turns into a fight for survival.

"We always say that, 'Man is an animal'. If you compare a man to an animal, a man is more ferocious, perverted and vindictive than an animal. So, 'Animal' is

the story of a common man, I represent the common man. The irony is that the whole country rests on a common man's shoulder, they are the backbone of the country," he said.

Beyond this play, Manjrekar said he has been developing a film for his actor friend Sanjay Dutt, which he said will be different from their previous venture like "Vaastav", "Kurukshehra",

## 'I would say the Sri Lankan surfaces were a lot slower and a lot lower' New Zealand don't make things bigger than they are, experience in India should help: Mitchell



**KOLKATA, March 2:** New Zealand don't make things bigger than they are, said Daryl Mitchell on Monday, adding that the Kiwis will rely on their recent experience of playing in India for the T20 World Cup semifinal.

New Zealand will take on the last edition's runners-up South Africa in the first semifinal to be played at the Eden Gardens here on Wednesday, and Mitchell said the Kiwis have complete clarity over how they want to operate.

"We're pretty clear how we want to operate as Black Caps and that's both on and off the field. We don't make things bigger than what they are, but we're also very excited to be in this position and know how lucky we are to be here in a semi-final," Mitchell told New Zealand Cricket.

"Just looking forward to getting stuck into the contest, trying to win little moments is something that we constantly speak about and hopefully that means we're head-

ing off to a final in a few days' time," Mitchell said.

New Zealand have been in India since the start of the year having played a three-match ODI and a five-match T20I series across various venues in the build-up to the showpiece.

Mitchell said New Zealand will look to bank on that experience.

"We've spent a bit of time here in India in the last two months and I guess we know what conditions we'll be coming up with," said

Mitchell as the Kiwis returned from Sri Lanka after playing a few games in the island nation.

"It'll be different to what we've experienced in the last fortnight in Sri Lanka. But also I think guys will trust the preparation that we've had over the last few months and just looking forward to getting stuck in."

"I would say the Sri Lankan surfaces were a lot slower and a lot lower and got it quite difficult towards the back end of innings."

New Zealand had earlier lost their group stage clash to South Africa by seven wickets.

"They've been one of the best teams in the competition for a reason and they are where they are, so we're really excited to take them on. Even here in Kolkata in the semi-final of the World Cup."

"Both teams are doing everything they can to try and move on to the next stage. For me, it's just going to be really cool to get into a full crowd at Eden Gardens. It's always pretty special," Mitchell added. Mitchell said being named the Player-of-the-Month for January after his exploits against India in the ODI series, which New Zealand won 2-1 for a historic result, was a team effort.

"It's nice. It's also recognition as a team for the success we've had in the month of January in 2026, (as) the ODI India series (victory) was historic for us as a country having never done that before," Mitchell said. (PTI)

## Stranded Sindhu set to miss All England Championships Lakshya and others set for stiff fight

**BIRMINGHAM, March 2:** Two-time Olympic medallist PV Sindhu is set to miss the All England Championships starting here on Tuesday after being stranded in Dubai amid the US bombing of Iran and the resultant air space closure in the Gulf region.

Travel disruptions have marred the build-up to the Super 1000 event, with Sindhu stuck in Dubai since Saturday after flights were suspended amid following US and Israeli strikes on Iran and the subsequent retaliation by Tehran.

Sindhu and her team, including Indonesian coach Irwansyah Adi Pratama, had a narrow escape after an explosion near their place of stay. They were subsequently moved to a secure location as tensions flared across the Gulf.

The Indian ace was scheduled to face Thailand's Supanida Katethong in the opening round but with Dubai airspace and airport continuing to be closed, she will be forced to pull out of the tournament. BWF is also keeping a close watch, maintaining "real-time oversight of the situation and stand ready to assist delegations experiencing delays or route changes."

"This includes reviewing and preparing potential contingencies within the competition schedule should any players experience delayed arrival," it said.

While Sindhu's participation remains uncertain, some of her fellow shuttlers have managed to reach Birmingham via alternate routes of Singapore and Africa. However, it remains to be seen



how the long and taxing travel will impact their preparations.

India's top men's singles contender Lakshya Sen and rising youngster Ayush Shetty, have reached without any travel issues. While Lakshya has drawn world No. 1 Shi Yu Qi of China, Ayush is up against Indonesia's Alwi Farhan in the opening round.

For Lakshya, a former semifinalist and runner-up here, it will be another tough test against Shi, against whom he has lost four of his five previous meetings against the Chinese. Ayush, the US Open Super 300 champion, will look to turn the tide against Farhan, having lost three of their five encounters, including the most recent one at the Indonesia Masters in January.

In women's singles, Malvika Bansod faces a stiff opening challenge against Tokyo Olympics champion Chen Yufei of China.

Unnati Hooda, whose flight was cancelled on Sunday forcing her to travel via Africa, will need to overcome jet lag when she takes on

Thailand's eighth seed Pornpawee Chochuwong in her opener.

In men's doubles, Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty, a former world No. 1, will spearhead India's challenge against Malaysia's Kang Khai Xing and Aaron Tai in the first round.

The women's doubles pair Treasa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand, who registered back-to-back semifinal finishes at the event in 2022 and 2023, will face Japan's Sayaka Hirota and Ayako Sakuramoto. In mixed doubles, Dhruv Kapila and Tanisha Crasto are up against Malaysia's Hoo Pang Ron and Cheng Su Yin, while Rohan Kapoor and Ruthvika Shivani Gadde will meet fifth seeds Thom Gicquel and Delphine Delrue of France.

Prakash Padukone (1980) and Pullela Gopichand (2001) remain the only Indians to have won the All England title. Besides them, only Saina Nehwal (2015 runner-up) and Lakshya (2022 runner-up) have come close in recent years. (PTI)

### Diksha finishes T-20 at NSW Open

**WOLLONGONG (AUSTRALIA), March 2:** Diksha Dagar, the lone Indian to make the cut, finished with yet another solid round to pick up a top-20 finish at the Women's NSW Open, here.

Diksha, who began the week with a 6-over 77 and was in danger of missing the cut, finished the week with a round of 68 on Sunday that gave her a 8-under total of 276 for a T-20 finish.

Agathe Laisne was crowned the Ladies European Tour (LET) winner after overcoming a crowded leaderboard on a dramatic final day.

The French golfer followed up her third round 64 (-7) with a 65 (-6) in the final round to secure a one-shot victory over Thailand's April Angurasaranee and Korean amateur Soomin Oh on 16-under par. This came after opening with rounds of 72-67 during a rain-hampered first couple of days.

The other three Indians in the field, Hitaashree Bakshi, Pranavi Urs and Avani Prashanth missed the cut in the weather-hit event.

Laisne has in the past won one Epsom Tour title which came in 2023 and two LET Access Series (LETAS) wins which both came in 2020.

She also becomes the second LET winner of the season after Charley Hull won the PIF Saudi Ladies International.

In solo fourth finished English rookie Charlotte Heath on 13-under par. The LET debutant finished with a flurry at Wollongong Golf Club going six-under par for her final six holes.

Australia's Sarah Kemp, Germany's Alexandra Försterling and England's Caley McGinty finished the week T5 on 12-under par.

Eight players rounded off the top-10 in T8 on 11-under par including Australian amateur Amelia Harris. (PTI)

### Aaron Rai finishes T-23rd, Yellamaraju is Tied-17th

**PALM BEACH GARDENS, March 2:** Aaron Rai shot a modest even par 71 on the final day to sign off Tied-23rd despite being in contention for a Top 10 finish for much of the week at the Cognizant Classic.

The Indo-British golfer had just one birdie and one bogey in the final round. With cards of 68-69-69-71, he totalled seven-under for the week.

Another player of Indian-origin Sudarshan Yellamaraju (68) finished Tied-17th at eight-under after cards of 68-72-68-68. Colombian Nico Echavarria did not make a bogey all weekend and shot five-under 66 to win despite being three shots back with three holes left. The win earned Echavarria a trip to the Masters in April.

It was Echavarria's third PGA TOUR win and first in the United States. The USD 1.728 million winner's check was the biggest of his career. (PTI)

## Four teams in contention to reach finals of DP World PGTI's 72 The League

**NUH (HARYANA), March 2:** Four teams remained in contention to reach the finals of DP World PGTI's 72 The League after the fourth round at the Classic Golf & Country Club here on Monday.

The top two teams -- UP Prometheans and Rajasthan Regals -- could not separate themselves from the rest of the field. It set up a cracking final round on Tuesday in the new all-professional golf league.

On Monday, both Rajasthan and UP started the day on 32 points. However, in their match against a resurgent Mumbai Aces, UP could garner only three points and advanced to 35 total points.

Regals, on the other hand, won both their singles earlier in the day, and then added a halve when their in-form pairing of Chikkarangappa S and Dhruv Sheoran held Jhared Hack and Stepan Danek to reach 39 points.

The two teams are now scheduled to play each other in the final-round match.

Nava Raipur and Charminar Champions also have a good chance of qualifying for the final, with both moving to 31 points, just four behind Prometheans.

Rajasthan lost the other two matches against Raipur with DP World PGTI Tour Order of Merit leader Honey Baisoya making six birdies and an eagle in his first 12 holes of fourballs playing alongside his captain Amardeep Singh Malik. They beat K Prabakaran and Michele Ortolani 4&3.

Vikrant Chopra and Shivendra Singh Sisodia lodged the day's best win, a 5&3 result over



Ayaan Gupta and Aryaman Mohan in four-somes.

Rajasthan captain Ajeetesh Sandhu, who won his singles, said: "It would have been nice to get a bit more separation, but it's always good to go into the final round as a leader.

"It just means we will have to play another good round tomorrow to make sure we are in the top-two. Our hands get a bit tied in the final round because we will have to play some players who haven't played one of the three formats that are being used."

Baisoya said he and his captain Malik decided to adopt a unique approach before the round.

"I told Hammer (Malik) on the first tee that in my mind I was playing a match play against him. I asked him what he would shoot, and he said 7-under. I told him I will beat him with a 10-under! Both Ortolani and Prabakaran played brilliantly, otherwise we could have won a lot

earlier," said Baisoya.

UP captain Bhattacharya drained a 20-footer for birdie to get ahead early, and then converted a critical 30-footer birdie on the 16th hole to go 2-up against Mumbai captain Veer Ahlawat and maintained the difference after 17 holes.

"Not the day we wanted, but better now than having a bad round tomorrow, or in the final. I am happy how I played today and did make a few good, long putts. But we will have to play much better tomorrow against Rajasthan as a team," said Bhattacharya.

With Chikha and Sheoran halving their match on Monday, Anant Singh Ahlawat of Nava Raipur is now the only unbeaten man in the field. Ahlawat was rested by the Raipur team on Monday.

In the final match that needed to be suspended in the opening round on February 24 because of darkness, Mumbai Aces and Nava Raipur finished the fourballs match with Mumbai winning the hole and halving the match.

72 The league has been launched by DP World PGTI in partnership with Game of Life Sports (GOLS).

In the final round of the league stage, apart from the Rajasthan-UP match, Charminar Champions will take on Mumbai Aces, while Nava Raipur will battle against bottom-of-the-standings Kolkata Classics.

League standings after the 4th round: Rajasthan Regals - 39 points; UP Prometheans - 35 points; Nava Raipur - 31 points; Charminar Champions - 31 points; Mumbai Aces - 24 points; Kolkata Classics - 11 points. (PTI)

## Cricket is a gentleman's game: Temba Bavuma on players avoiding handshakes

**NEW DELHI, March 2:** South Africa's inspirational Test and ODI leader both on and off the field, Temba Bavuma believes players not shaking hands is not a good endorsement for the game.

Bavuma, who is part of the commentary panel for the T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka, spoke to PTI on a range of topics including the no handshake policy in India-Pakistan games, the Proteas' unbeaten run in the tournament, his own future, and Indian batters' struggles against spin across formats besides reflecting on his Test team's historic triumph in India last year.

The diminutive batter, who has never shied away from speaking on social issues, also strongly advocated for equal opportunities for all in his country and stressed on the sport's power to unite.

"Yeah it (no handshake policy) doesn't look good right if you're looking at it from the outside. It doesn't look good for the game of cricket, at the end of the day it's a gentleman's game, that's what we've grown up with, a certain behaviour that is expected of us..." he said.

"...but like I said that is from the outside. I am not not versed with the politics between India and Pakistan so I can't speak to that point of view but I think as a spectator who's just looking at it as it is without the full context, it doesn't hold well for the game of cricket," added the 35-year-old.

**Landmark WTC win fuels belief of T20 WC squad**  
South Africa's Test series win in India after 25 years came after the drought ending ICC WTC title at Lord's in June. The achievements in the last 12 months have



helped the Proteas' shed the long-standing chokers' tag.

Aiden Markram, Kagiso Rabada, Marco Jansen, Lungi Ngidi, Tristan Stubbs -- they were all part of the victorious WTC campaign and they are in India too on a mission. South Africa are the team to beat in the ongoing T20 World Cup and have emerged as hot favourites for the title after the heartbreaking loss to India in the 2024 edition's final in Barbados.

"...the confidence, the belief that we've

done it before, we've gotten over the line there's guys who were there at the WTC final who are here within the T20 side. The experience of this T20 team from the 2024 World Cup, the hurt that would have come with not being able to go over the line that would have definitely been part of their motivation to make sure that things go their way this time.

"All the ingredients are there for the guys to go all the way. The fact that the guys are undefeated in the World Cup

speaks volumes and they've really played good cricket from a batting point of view, from a bowling point of view, the guys have really been on top," Bavuma said ahead of the semifinal against New Zealand on March 4.

**Global phenomena behind India's spin struggles**

South Africa spinners Simon Harmer and Keshav Maharaj out-bowled their Indian counterparts in the Test series last year. That was the red-ball format but In-

## A long way from the war, Iran loses its opening Women's Asian Cup game to S Korea

**GOLD COAST, (AUSTRALIA), March 2:** Zahra Ghanbari and her Iran team stood while their national anthem played at the Women's Asian Cup soccer tournament on Monday, a long way from the war that started on the weekend with a major attack by Israel and the United States.

Before the opening loss against South Korea, Iran head coach Marziyeh Jafari declined to comment on the military strikes or the death of her country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, saying the squad needed to focus on the tournament.

The mood was mostly sombre during the anthem, although there were some smiles to acknowledge supporters at the Gold Coast stadium. And then it was down to the business of football.

South Korea, runners-up at the 2022 Women's Asian Cup, won 3-0 despite the dogged defense of the Iranians anchored by goalkeeper Maryam Yektaei.

The South Koreans had 20 shots in the first half but only led 1-0 at the break on Choe Yu-ri's goal in the 37th minute. She swooped on the rebound when Jang Sel-gi's angled left-foot shot deflected off the

post. Kim Hye-ri converted from the penalty spot in the 59th minute and Ko Yoo-jin finished off the scoring with a well-timed glancing header in the 75th.

"We definitely could have scored a few more -- missed a couple of chances -- that's something we'll definitely work on in the upcoming trainings," South Korea substitute Casey Phair said.

"But I think it was a really good starting point to start the tournament with three points."

Ghanbari, the captain, was substituted off late in regulation. Her team had only 21% of possession in the game and had just three shots at goal compared with 32 for the South Koreans. A small pocket of Iran fans chanted and waved red, white and green flags, including the pre-Islamic revolution flag.

One of the Iran team's biggest targets at the tournament is to secure a place in the Women's World Cup next year in Brazil, and that will require at least a quarterfinal run in Australia.

Iran will next play tournament host Australia on Thursday at the same venue on the Gold Coast, a beachside tourist destination in Queensland state.

## Mizo refu

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## I should have batted faster, take blame as captain: Shai Hope on WI exit from T20WC

**KOLKATA, March 2:** Taking responsibility for the West Indies' elimination from the T20 World Cup, skipper Shai Hope said he should have batted faster at the top to post a more challenging target for India in their must-win Super Eight game here.

Defending champions India chased down a fairly stiff 196-run target to knock the former winners out of the tournament at the Eden Gardens here on Sunday.

The visitors appeared at least 20 runs short as Hope ate up 33 balls for his 32, striking at just over 96, including 17 dot balls that probably cost them heavily in a high-scoring contest.

"Yes, I'll take the blame. I should have batted a lot faster -- if that's what you want me to say," said Hope in the post-match media interaction without dodging any tough question, here on Sunday.

"When you're leading, you want to put your hand up and set the tone at the top. It didn't happen for me today. I just didn't get going today," he conceded. "But in situations like this, when you're struggling, everyone struggles. But I don't think I was batting badly."

India had the perfect plan to tighten the marauding Windies after Suryakumar Yadav opted to bowl. He went in with Arshdeep Singh, Hardik Pandya and Axar Patel in the powerplay and they did their job, keeping Hope quiet early.

It was then that mystery spinner Varun Chakravarthy, held back deliberately for the middle phase,



bowled him with a delivery that skidded through to rattle the stumps.

Though opener Roston Chase's acceleration and the late flourish from Rovman Powell and Jason Holder lifted West Indies to 195/4, the total felt under-par on a good Eden surface with dew aiding the chase. Hope, however, said the shortfall of runs was not for lack of intent.

"It was a bit of both. I hit a few fielders and they bowled well. As much as you'd love to hit every ball for six, it doesn't happen. It's just that I was hitting the fielders and then trying to play the situation a bit more."

"Obviously, I wanted to bat a little bit deeper into the innings and face most of the spin threat in the middle," he explained.

Hope further admitted that the powerplay phase could have been

better utilised by his team.

"We wanted 65-70 in the powerplay. We were 45 without loss, so we had a platform. With the batting depth we have, I didn't see it as a big issue at the time, but we didn't execute as well as we wanted."

Calling it a fine-margin contest, he said: "It's always a game of small margins. There are so many moments you can look back at and say maybe we should have done a little more or a little less of something else. But one team has to win." He further said the conditions aided the chasing side and rued lost toss.

"Here in Eden Gardens, chasing is usually better, especially with the dew. It always becomes a factor. I don't think I could win a toss, so I'm always giving the guys the hard way out of it."

"I don't think - I won a toss this tournament? One? Okay. Probably

before that, the rest of the series, maybe one or two. Yeah, so that always putting me on the back foot."

However, looking at the broader picture, Hope chose to focus on the campaign's positives.

"There are a lot of positives. Our bowling was much better than in previous series. The powerplay bowling especially stood up," he noted.

Sanju deserves A+ Hope was effusive in praising India's match-winner Sanju, whose unbeaten 97 anchored the home team's chase. Having faced criticism and frequent exclusion in recent past, Sanju made the opportunity count in the biggest game.

A natural opener, he was not the first choice of the side at the start of the tournament after Ishan Kishan's blazing return. Ishan was the preferred one with Abhishek Sharma in the opening position.

But following India's batting meltdown against South Africa, the management had to fall back on his experience at the top.

He repaid that faith with a blazing start against Zimbabwe and then produced the innings of his life at the Eden.

"He shot the ball very nicely from the beginning all the way through to the end of the innings and he's paced it really nicely. He was very smart and calculated with the way he went about his strokes."

"You must give him an A-plus with the way he played today. But we wish he didn't have that innings today," Hope said. (PTI)

## Atiqa Mir marks major milestone in Europe, becomes first Indian to secure podium

**VALENCIA, March 2:** Racing prodigy Atiqa Mir has created history by becoming the first Indian to secure a podium finish in the highly-competitive European leg of the COTFA karting series.

The 11-year-old finished third in the final of the opening round in the Champions of the Future Academy (COTFA) series. The result over the weekend was also Atiqa's biggest success since moving from the mini to the OKNJ (junior) category.

Atiqa is the first Indian to be supported by the F1 Academy, a testament to her special talent. Throughout the weekend, Atiqa was in top form and also recorded the fastest lap in the final.

She was on course to get pole position but encountered a slow driver in the last corner on her flying lap, pushing her down to ninth on the grid. Determined to get back to the front, Atiqa stormed to P3 in Race 1 and P2 in Race 2, setting her up for a third place start in the Final Race.

The 15-lap race in the final was a true test of strength and stamina on the super fast Lucas Guerrero Circuit. Atiqa held second place at the start and had a long battle with the leading pack.

On the final lap, Atiqa made an audacious move on the second-lapped driver around the outside of the infamous chicane at the last corner. She held off the challenge to secure a second place on track, a record finish for an Indian in the Europe leg of the series.

A post-race penalty dropped her to the third spot on the podium.



On day two of the weekend, Atiqa was again held back by a slow driver on her flying lap during qualifying. Her theoretical time was good enough for pole position but she had to settle for seventh on the grid.

In Race 1, Atiqa was pushed off the circuit before recovering to finish 9th. In Race 2, she zoomed to a special victory, only to be denied by a post race penalty for contact with another driver.

Despite her fair share of bad luck, Atiqa was able to produce head-turning performances through the weekend.

"That was a great race. Really tough pace at the front and I could manage to fight till the last corner. I took a risk in the last corner going for the move as I didn't want to settle for a third place finish."

"Like the great Ayrton Senna said if you no longer go for a gap that exists you are no longer a racing driver. It was risky but it paid off. I'm happy to have the India flag at the podium and a proud moment for me and the country," said Atiqa.

Atiqa's father Asif Mir, who is India's first national karting champion, also reflected on a successful weekend.

"An outstanding performance in her debut in OKNJ race in this series. She had only few sessions to adapt to the circuit which she had never driven before in a Junior kart."

"She had good speed but missed the top spot due to the post race penalty. I don't mind that as long as she makes overtakes like that," Asif Mir added. (PTI)

## Zimbabwe cricketers' family-like bond with fan group 'Castle Corner'

**NEW DELHI, March 2:** Instead of heading back to the dressing room at the end of a gutsy but gruelling T20 World Cup campaign, Zimbabwe's exhausted cricketers sprinted towards a corner of the spectators' stands to thank half a dozen supporters who they consider family.

The supporters belong to the Castle Corner, a fan group that travels to cheer the Zimbabwe team. Inspirational skipper Sikandar Raza was not part of the group that acknowledged the support from the loyal fans who secured last minute funding to travel to India for the Super 8 leg of the tournament after witnessing the team's unbeaten campaign in Sri Lanka.

However, he ran towards the 'Castle Corner' after finishing a TV interview following his special all-round performance, albeit in a five-wicket loss to South Africa. Castle Corner holds a special place in the heart of the players, so much so that every member of the team knows the fans and their family members by name.

For background, Castle Corner

is the name of a stand at the Harare Sports Club back home.

With their infectious energy, the members of the group also brought the neutral Delhi residents on their side during Sunday's game.

Every dismissal was hugely cheered as Zimbabwe took three wickets in the powerplay after posting a below 153 for seven. Proteas eventually chased down the target comfortably.

The love and respect for Zimbabwe was because of their giant-killing run in the tournament. A team that was toiling in nondescript locations 18 months ago pulled off upsets against the mighty Australia and Sri Lanka.

"Like you said, not many teams or people gave us a chance (in the tournament). Most importantly, even if you look at it today, we were out, but I have huge respect for Delhi and the crowd. The way they were chanting Zimbabwe, the ultimate goal for me and for my team was to earn respect," said Raza in his campaign-ending media interaction. (PTI)

## MoS Sports Raksha Khadse announces athletics events in 250 districts to mark IWD

**NEW DELHI, March 2:** Over two lakh girls across 250 districts nationwide will compete in ASMITA athletics events on March 8 and 9 to mark the International Women's Day. Minister of State for Sports Raksha Khadse announced on Monday, advocating increased participation of women in sports to bolster India's 2036 Olympic bid.

The event, which is a part of Sports Ministry's initiative, will also set the ball rolling for the creation of a pool of women technical officials across the country, keeping in mind the 2030 Commonwealth Games in Ahmedabad and India's bid to become an Olympic host. The International Women's Day (IWD) is celebrated on March 8.

ASMITA (Achieving Sports Milestone by Inspiring Women) is a part of Khelo India Scheme's mission to promote sports among women through leagues. The initiative started in 2021.

Across 250 locations nationwide, 100m, 200m, and 400m races will be held in the Under-

13, 13-18 and 18+ categories. Each venue will deploy five Technical Officials, 10 Volunteers, one Competition Manager, a Past Champion Athlete (PCA) and District Youth

Officer to manage the events. Women Technical Officials Development Workshop will also be conducted alongside training for referees and timekeepers. Introduction to Athletics Federation of India-aligned officiating norms as well as digital data upload and competition documentation training will also be imparted to the participants. "It is an effort towards identifying talent for the 2030 CWG and the 2036 Olympics. Women's participation is being encouraged all across and I feel in our country it is not high as high as it should be," Khadse said here in a press conference.

"During my interactions to promote ASMITA, I have realised that the girls struggle to get the hand-holding that is needed to take the first step into sports. ASMITA is hoping to bridge that gap," she added. (PTI)

## Cricket is team game, for too many years, we only spoke about certain contributions: Gambhir

**KOLKATA, March 2:** For Gautam Gambhir, the essence of team sport is acknowledgement of every contribution big or small, which according to him was missing in Indian cricket for long.

Had Shivam Dube not smashed a couple of boundaries in the penultimate over, no one would have spoken about Sanju Samson's match-winning 97 against West Indies on Sunday, said the Indian head coach.

Gambhir asserted that till he is the coach, every contributions will get an honourable mention.

"Glad you're talking about every contribution because for many years, we've only spoken about certain contributions. This is a team sport, and this will always remain a team sport," Gambhir said, speaking in his inimitable style although without referring to certain contributions.

"For me, Shivam's two boundaries are as important as Sanju's 97 because if he hadn't hit those two boundaries, you won't even spoken about it (97-run knock)."

"The big contribution makes headlines. The small contribution, the contribution that can help the team win, cross that line, are very important."

Gambhir has underlined his team philosophy and till he is around there won't be any special



contribution.

"And that's why I say that this is going to be the philosophy going forward till I am there."

**My coaching mantra is based on instinct not data**

While most coaches across the globe would tell you that data has huge role to play in T20 cricket, Gambhir believes in old school methodology of relying on gut feel. "I don't believe in data, honestly. I've never seen the data. I don't even know what data is all about. I absolutely do not believe in it, because I feel it's more about instinct," Gambhir said but his comment was surprising since the team relies much on data analyst Hari Prasad.

"T20 cricket is about instinct and backing your instinct as well.

Whatever knowledge I have about the game and T20 format, I try and probably give it to the captain, try and help him out as much as I can.

"But ultimately, it's the captain that takes the final call. But data and all, I don't believe honestly, because it's very over-rated. For me, I think we are very fortunate that we've got world-class players."

"We've got guys who we can use differently, because not many teams have that luxury. Imagine someone like Jaspreet (Bumrah) or Arshdeep or even Varun, we can use them at any phase of the game."

"And from the batting point of view, you've got power. That is something which is very important. When you've got power, you're never away from the chase. You're never out of the game as well." (PTI)

## 'Just before the World Cup, I used to read headlines saying Sanju fails again' Ganguly backs Samson as white-ball regular

**KOLKATA, March 2:** Former captain Sourav Ganguly on Monday backed Sanju Samson to feature consistently in India's white-ball squads and expressed surprise at the criticism about the swashbuckling keeper-batter in the run-up to the T20 World Cup.

Samson smashed an unbeaten 97 off 50 balls -- his first fifty in 13 innings -- to anchor India's 196-run chase in what was a virtual quarterfinal against the West Indies here on Sunday. Terming it an outstanding knock, Ganguly said: "He's a very good player. He should consistently play for India in white-ball cricket -- 100 per cent. "It was a virtual quarterfinal, and to be 97 not out shows his quality. He's that sort of a player... when he gets in,

he will hurt the opposition." The innings came on a day when India's most established batters -- Abhishek Sharma, Ishan Kishan, skipper Suryakumar Yadav and Hardik Pandya - departed cheaply. But Samson absorbed the pressure, paced the chase smartly, and batted till the end playing a risk-free game.

"He played to the situation, and that was important. What it teaches all of us is that the same boy who, in the last six months, could not find his place in the team - whether it was Ishan Kishan opening or somebody else coming in.

"Just before the World Cup, I used to read headlines saying 'Sanju fails again', 'he should not deserve a place', 'India has so much talent, why is Shubman Gil-



not in the side?' - and yet here is a boy in a quarterfinal game, gets 97 not out and takes you to the semi-final," Ganguly added.

**England tougher than West**

Indies

Ganguly also stated that England will be a tougher opponent than the West Indies, adding that the home team must maintain its

clinical form to cross the semi-final hurdle in Mumbai.

India produced a near-perfect chase to beat West Indies by five wickets in a high-scoring do-or-die contest at Eden Gardens on Sunday, setting up a last-four clash against England at the Wankhede Stadium on Thursday.

"England will be a stronger opposition than the West Indies. They have to play just like they won yesterday," Ganguly said on the sidelines of the CII West Bengal's Annual Meeting & Conference here. After a rusty start to their campaign, the Harry Brook-led side peaked at the right time, winning all three Super Eights matches to top Group 2 and enter the semifinals on a high note. (PTI)