

6 NATION

- Condensed voting period but delayed counting in 5 state assemblies this time
- Strategic setback to India's Central Asian diplomacy: Cong slams govt on Chabahar port

7 NORTHEAST

- Arunachal govt committed to strengthening textile sector: CM
- BJP gives priority to tribal development, says Tripura CM

EC announces election schedule for 4 states, Puducherry; two-phase polling in West Bengal • Code of conduct comes into force from today

Single-phase Assam polls on April 9

NEW DELHI, March 15: Assembly elections in Assam, Kerala and Puducherry will be held on a single day on April 9, in Tamil Nadu on April 23 and in two phases in West Bengal on April 23 and 29, while votes will be counted for all polls on May 4, the Election Commission announced on Sunday.

Compared to eight voting days spread across almost a month in 2021, there will be three polling days in a 20-day period in these elections, which will see the BJP trying to retain power in Assam, while it will be pitted against ruling parties in West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Puducherry is governed by NDA partner All India N R Congress.

A total of 17.4 crore voters are eligible to vote in the elections to

Final pacts with 4 armed groups in Assam

GUWAHATI, March 15: The Assam government on Sunday signed memoranda of settlement with three Kuki armed groups and one Hmar outfit, claiming that the agreements mark the end of "ethnic militancy" in the state, an official statement said.

The four groups had laid down arms in 2012 in the presence of the then Union home minister and the chief minister, and signed the Suspension of Operations (SoO) pact.

The Kuki groups which signed the pacts are United Kukiang Defence Army (UKDA), Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA) and Kuki Liberation Organisation (KLO)/Kuki Liberation Army (KLA).

The Hmar People's Convention-Democratic (HPC-D) also inked the final pact with the government at a programme here.

The UKDA was formed in 2010, and the KRA in 2000 in Karbi Anglong district, while the KLO and KLA were formed in 1992 and 1993, respectively, in Dima Hasao. The Hmar outfit was formed in 2003-04.

Several rounds of tripartite talks were held, with the process accelerated under the present government and culminating in the agreements, the statement said.

The two pacts, one each with the Kuki and Hmar groups, envisage the formation of welfare and development councils for the Kuki and Hmar communities, with headquarters in Guwahati.

There will be a budget provision for both councils, which will be prepared by them as per their requirements and submitted to the state government's Transformation and Development department for approval.

The government also assured the armed groups of rehabilitating its cadres and providing financial compensation to the families of militants killed (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

SCHEDULE FOR ASSAM (All 126 Assembly Constituencies)	
Poll Events	Date and Day
Date of Issue of Gazette Notification	16.03.2026 (Monday)
Last Date for making Nominations	23.03.2026 (Monday)
Date for the scrutiny of Nominations	24.03.2026 (Tuesday)
Last date for the withdrawal of candidatures	26.03.2026 (Thursday)
Date of Poll	09.04.2026 (Thursday)
Date of Counting	04.05.2026 (Monday)
Date before which election shall be completed	06.05.2026 (Wednesday)

five assemblies with 824 constituencies. Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar said at a press conference here.

"Voting for all seats in Assam

will be held on April 9. Voting in West Bengal will take place in two phases on April 23 and April 29.

"The voting for all seats in Kerala and Puducherry will take place

removed from the electoral rolls, but they will also be driven out," Shah said.

He praised the chief minister for carrying out the eviction of infiltrators who had settled on land encroached by them.

"Sarma has already cleared 1.5 lakh bighas of land encroached by infiltrators, and the day will come soon when there will not be a single one left in the country," he added.

During the Congress rule, Assam was "known for violence", and several youths were killed, Shah claimed.

"The Congress did nothing for the youth, but its leaders were only concerned about the benefits of their families," he added.

Shah alleged that the grand old party believes in "corruption, polarisation by promoting infiltrators and looking after the interests of their children", and claimed that the BJP's focus has been on "development, driving out infiltrators and ensuring that the interests of the children of poor people are taken care of".

The Union minister continued his tirade against the Congress, accusing the party of defaming the country during the AI Summit in New Delhi when its members staged a protest at the venue by taking off their shirts.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi organised such a big and successful summit with heads of 22 countries and CEOs of 80 international companies participating. Several MoUs were signed, but the Congress tried to defame the country, he claimed. (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

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on April 9, while all Tamil Nadu seats will go to polls on April 23," said Kumar, who was flanked by the two Election Commissioners - Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi.

The model code of conduct has come into effect immediately with the announcement of the poll schedule.

Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Kerala are currently ruled by opposition DMK, Trinamool Congress and Left Front, respectively.

There are 234 assembly seats in Tamil Nadu where DMK leader M K Stalin has been the chief minister since 2021.

West Bengal has a total of 294 assembly seats with TMC leader Mamata Banerjee in power since 2011.

Kerala has 140 seats and Left leader Pinarayi Vijayan has been the chief minister since 2016, leading the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government.

In Assam, there are 126 assembly seats, and the BJP has been in power in the Northeastern state since 2016. Himanta Biswa Sarma has been the chief minister since 2021.

Puducherry Chief Minister N Rangasamy has been in power since 2021. The UT has a total of 30 seats where polling will take place.

CEC Kumar said the elections must be free of violence or inducement and warned that the EC will take strong action against any violation. Asked about the announcement (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

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LPG bookings fall to 77 lakh

No fuel shortages, online bookings rise after govt campaign

NEW DELHI, March 15: LPG refill bookings have declined to about 77 lakh from 88.8 lakh earlier, indicating some easing of panic buying, even as the government said there is no shortage of petrol, diesel or cooking gas, and supplies remain stable despite the West Asia conflict.

In a daily update on the impact of the West Asia situation, the government said the share of online LPG bookings has risen to about 87 per cent from 84 per cent, attributing the increase to a campaign by oil marketing companies promoting digital booking and discouraging people from queuing up at LPG dealerships for panic purchases.

All domestic "refineries are operating at high capacity and maintaining adequate crude oil inventories," the update said. "The country remains self-sufficient in the production of petrol and diesel, requiring no imports of the fuels to meet domestic demand."

Oil marketing companies have reported no dry-outs at fuel retail outlets or LPG distributorships, and petrol, diesel and LPG supplies are being maintained regularly.

"LPG bookings have shown a decline, with about 77 lakh book-



ings recorded yesterday (on Saturday) compared to 88.8 lakh bookings on March 13, 2026," the update said, adding "Online LPG cylinder bookings have increased from 84 per cent to about 87 per cent."

The government said it continues to prioritise the interests of domestic consumers and ensure uninterrupted LPG supply, particularly for households and priority sectors such as hospitals and educational institutions.

Several States and UTs, including Bihar, Delhi, Haryana and Ra-

jasthan, have issued orders for allocation of non-domestic LPG in line with government guidelines.

State governments are undertaking enforcement measures to prevent hoarding and black marketing of petrol, diesel and LPG.

Raids are being carried out in several states, including Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, to check hoarding and black marketing of LPG cylinders.

Officials of PSU Oil Marketing Companies are also conducting surprise inspections at LPG distributorships to ensure smooth supply

and prevent irregularities.

"Citizens are advised not to resort to panic buying as adequate stocks of petrol and diesel are available across the country," the update said.

Priority sectors continue to receive protected natural gas supplies, including 100 per cent supply for piped natural gas (PNG or natural gas piped to household for cooking purpose) and compressed natural gas (CNG), while supplies to industrial and commercial users have been regulated at about 80 per cent.

Commercial LPG cylinders have been placed at the disposal of state governments for priority distribution and are now available in 30 states and Union Territories, while authorities have stepped up raids and inspections to curb hoarding and black-marketing, it said.

The government has also amended the LPG Control Order to mandate that consumers with PNG connections surrender domestic LPG connections, while domestic LPG production from refineries has been maximised and booking intervals rationalised to ensure equitable distribution, it said.

The Ministry of External Affairs is closely monitoring the situation

in West Asia and assisting Indian nationals in the region through missions operating round-the-clock helplines. Around 1.94 lakh passengers have returned to India from the region since February 28, it added.

Domestic LPG production from refineries has been maximized, and several supply and demand-side measures have been implemented.

PSU oil marketing companies are promoting digital bookings, discouraging panic bookings and keeping LPG distributorships open on Sundays to facilitate smooth supply.

"Citizens are advised not to panic as the government remains committed to maintaining adequate LPG availability for households and essential sectors," it said. "Consumers are requested to avoid panic bookings, use digital booking platforms and avoid unnecessary visits to LPG distributors." Citizens are encouraged to opt for alternate fuels such as PNG wherever possible.

"The government continues to maintain coordination among the concerned Ministries and agencies and is taking necessary steps to ensure preparedness across key sectors and safeguard national interests," it added. (PTI)

Scindia launches first integrated phygital service centre in MP's Guna district



NEW DELHI, March 15: The first integrated phygital service centre to facilitate online services for beneficiaries visiting the outlet has been launched in Umri village, Guna district, Madhya Pradesh, according to an official statement released on Sunday. The centre was launched by Union Telecom Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia as part of the Samridh Gram Phygital Services Pilot Initiative by the Department of Telecommunications.

"With the launch of the Samridh Gram initiative in Umri, Guna, we are bringing the world to our Umri. From education and agriculture to healthcare and government services, technology is placing new opportunities directly in the hands of our people," Scindia said at the launch.

The project leverages connectivity available in rural India through the BharatNet project.

The Samridh Kendra has been conceptualised as a single-window rural service hub bringing together healthcare, education, skilling, agriculture, financial services, e-governance support, entrepreneurship facilitation and digital connectivity services at one location.

Scindia said that through the centre, farmers will be able to access real-time insights on soil moisture, nutrients, and crop health through digital tools, making agriculture smarter and more productive.

Students will gain access to modern learning resources.

"Everyone in Umri will receive faster healthcare through on-site diagnostics and tele-consultation with doctors from Delhi and other states. Blood test reports will be produced in less than 30 minutes," the minister said.

He said essential government services, from certificates to e-banking, will now be available within the Samridh Gram itself.

"BharatNet has created one of the world's largest rural broadband infrastructures, and the next phase of India's digital transformation involves ensuring meaningful utilisation of this connectivity to improve the quality of life in villages, the minister noted.

The centre will also facilitate assisted access to e-governance services, including information on government schemes, issuance of certificates, digital documentation and support for online citizen services.

Financial and digital services available at the centre include banking and digital payment services, financial literacy support and assisted access to e-commerce platforms.

Connectivity services are being provided through BharatNet-enabled high-speed FTTH broadband and public Wi-Fi access under the PM-WANI framework, the statement said. (PTI)

Indian crude tanker sails out of UAE's Fujairah safely

NEW DELHI, March 15: An Indian-flagged crude tanker sailed out safely from the UAE's Fujairah after loading oil, despite an attack on the oil terminal, as the government on Sunday said it is closely monitoring the situation in West Asia while ensuring stable fuel supplies and maritime safety.

The vessel, Jag Laadki, carrying about 80,800 tonnes of Murban crude oil, departed Fujairah at 1030 hrs IST and is bound for India, with all crew members safe, the government said in an update on preparedness measures.

Jag Laadki is the fourth Indian-flagged vessel to have come out of the war zone unharmed.

Besides, the safe passage being an important milestone for Indian diplomacy, the cargo they



are carrying is considered critical as shipping constraints in the Strait of Hormuz have impacted India's energy supplies.

"On March 14, 2026, while the Indian-flag vessel Jag Laadki was loading crude oil at the

Fujairah Single Point Mooring, the Fujairah oil terminal was attacked. The vessel sailed safely from Fujairah at 1030 hrs IST today (Sunday) carrying about 80,800 tonnes of Murban crude oil and is bound for India," the update said.

"The vessel and all Indian seafarers onboard are safe."

On Saturday, two Indian-flag LPG carriers - Shivalik and Nanda Devi - carrying about 92,712 tonnes of LPG crossed the war-hit Strait of Hormuz. Shivalik is due to reach Mundra port in Gujarat on March 16, and Nanda Devi would dock at Kandla port on March 17, according to the update.

The two ships were among the 24 ships that were stranded on the west side of the strait since

the war broke out in the region.

Besides the 24 on the west side of the strait, four others were stranded on the east side.

One of the four on the east side, an India-flagged oil tanker, Jag Prakash, carrying gasoline from Oman to Africa, crossed the war-hit strait on Friday.

Jag Prakash loaded gasoline from Sohar port in Oman and is now headed to Tanga in Tanzania. It is due to reach Tanga on March 21.

The government said Indian vessels and seafarers operating in the region remain safe, and maritime operations are being closely monitored. At present, 22 Indian-flagged vessels with 611 seafarers remain on the west side of the Persian Gulf region. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Single-phase Assam

made by the West Bengal chief minister, barely minutes ahead of the scheduled announcement of the assembly polls, about the clearance of DA arrears of its employees and a hike in honorarium of purohitas and muezzins, Kumar said whatever has happened has happened but the model code of conduct comes into effect immediately and no such announcements could be made henceforth. For Assam, Kerala and Puducherry, the notification for the elections will be issued on March 16, and the last date for filing nominations is March 23. Scrutiny of nominations will take place on March 24 and the last date for the withdrawal of candidatures is March 26.

For Tamil Nadu, the notification for the polls will be issued on March 30 and the last date for filing nominations is April 6. The date for the scrutiny of nominations is April 7 and the last date for the withdrawal of candidatures is April 9. In the first phase elections in West Bengal, notifications will be issued on March 30, while for the second phase on April 2. The last date for filing nominations for the first phase is April 6 and for the second phase is April 9. The scrutiny of nominations for the first phase elections in West Bengal will take place on April 7 and for the second phase on April 10. The last date for the withdrawal of candidatures for the first phase is April 9 and for the second phase is April 13. In West Bengal, polling will be held in 152 assembly constituencies in the first phase and in 142 seats in the second phase. CEC Kumar said presiding officers at all polling booths will upload voter turnout data every two hours and immediately after voting ends.

"The Election Commission will ensure greater transparency in the counting of votes and announcement of results. Election Commission has asked all enforcement agencies to ensure elections are impartial and violence-free," he said.

Opposition parties had raised questions on the voter turnout data after the last few assembly elections. The term of the assembly will come to an end in West Bengal on May 7, in Tamil Nadu on May 10, in Assam on May 20, in Kerala on May 23, and in Puducherry on June 15.

There are 6.4 crore voters in West Bengal, 5.67 crore in Tamil Nadu, 2.7 crore in Kerala, 2.5 crore in Assam and 9.44 lakh in Puducherry. There will be 2,18,807 polling stations in all four states and one UT -- of which 31,486 booths are in Assam, 30,471 in Kerala, 75,032 in Tamil Nadu, 80,719 in West Bengal and 1,099 in Puducherry. A total of 25 lakh election officials will be deployed, out of which 15 lakh are polling personnel, 8.5 lakh security personnel, 49,000 micro observers for polling, 1,444 observers, 40,000 counting officials, 21,000 sector officers and 15,000 micro observers for counting. (PTI)

Shah slams 15

and Hospital in Guwahati, at a programme held on its premises. He also virtually inaugurated two cancer centres at Golaghat and Tinsukia, both under Assam Cancer Care Foundation (ACCF), constructed at a cost of ₹ 135 crore each. Shah virtually laid the foundation stone for super-specialty hospitals at Diphu Medical College and Hospital (₹ 220 crore), Jorhat Medical College and Hospital (₹ 310 crore), and Barpeta Medical College and Hospital (Rs 284 crore). The foundation stone for a ₹ 218-crore Swasthya Bhawan in Guwahati, and the Abhayapuri District Hospital (₹ 115 crore) were also laid by the Union home minister. Shah arrived here on Saturday evening on a two-day visit to Assam, his fourth visit to the northeastern state in four months. (PTI)

AAP announces first

three members. In the opposition camp, the Congress has 26 MLAs, AIUDF has 15 members, and the CPI(M) has one legislator. There is one Independent MLA as well. The counting of votes will be on May 4. (PTI)

Confident that BJP

"We are also in politics and have been in opposition, organising protests and dharnas, but there is a place for such demonstrations. The summit was a place where the participants had come to see the developments made in the sector and invest in it, but the Congress used the platform for its politics and made such a vulgar display of its protest," the Union minister said. Shah asserted that in his bid to "constantly oppose the PM and the BJP, Rahul Gandhi has now started going against the country".

"Political parties often make mistakes, but they apologise, and even the Congress has done so before. Rahul Gandhi has, however, crossed all levels of decency and instead of apologising, he went on to say that those involved in this shameful act were his 'babbar sher' (courageous people)," he said.

Shah asserted that he believes that the people of the country will never accept such a "shameful display of defaming the country". He also condemned the leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha for "drinking tea and eating pakora at the gates of Parliament". (PTI)

Final pacts with

during insurgency. "With these two pacts, the ethnic militancy comes to an end in the state of Assam," the statement said. It further said during the last few years, the central and state governments have signed MoS with Bodo, Karbi, Adivasi groups and ULFA, and rehabilitated more than 9,000 cadres.

These groups deposited 1,012 arms, 25,488 rounds of ammunition and 34 grenades. (PTI)

Assam polls: BJP

highlighted by the party as key achievements ahead of the polls.

Sarma's assertive political style and visibility across the state are also among its strengths.

Frequent visits by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah and other senior BJP leaders are also expected to help the party reinforce its "double-engine government" pitch.

The BJP's organisational network across much of the state is also seen as a significant advantage going into the elections.

Weakness: Anti-incumbency after two consecutive terms could pose a challenge for the BJP, particularly in constituencies where development concerns persist or where sitting legislators face local resentment.

The party may also face resistance from sections of minority voters, particularly Bengali-speaking Muslims, amid criticism from the opposition over the government's eviction drives and rhetoric around illegal immigration. Opposition parties have also raised allegations of corruption against Sarma and his family members, which the BJP has denied. Issues such as long-pending demands of six communities for Scheduled Tribe status could also figure in the electoral discourse.

Opportunity: A fragmented opposition could work to the ruling coalition's advantage, with divisions among anti-BJP parties potentially splitting votes in several constituencies. The state government's various welfare schemes, especially those aimed at women, youth and economically weaker sections, are expected to play a key role in shaping voter preferences in favour of the ruling party.

The party will also seek to leverage its stance on illegal immigration to strengthen its support base.

Threat: Internal dissent, particularly among ticket aspirants who may be denied nominations, could pose challenges if not managed effectively. The CM's combative political style and sharp attacks, particularly those against Muslims, may polarise voters in certain constituencies. Complacency among party workers after a decade in power is being seen as a factor the BJP may need to guard against. (PTI)

Rajor Dal names

polls, representing the party as its lone MLA in the House. His name was not mentioned in either of the lists for this election. In the current 126-member assembly, the ruling BJP's strength is 64, while its allies AGP has nine MLAs, UPPL has seven and BPF has three members. In the opposition camp, the Congress has 26 MLAs, AIUDF has 15 members and CPI(M) has one MLA. There is one Independent legislator as well. (PTI)

Will 'Justice for Zubeen'

issue in constituencies where Muslims are in majority.

The two major cornerstones related to the immigration issue -- the updation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) -- are likely to feature during the campaigning, with the ruling party claiming that the opposition to CAA was unreasonable as only a handful of Hindus from Bangladesh have applied for citizenship.

Eviction: The state government's policy of evicting alleged encroachers, most belonging to the Muslim community, will also be a major issue raised by both the ruling and opposition parties. The ruling alliance will claim that it has freed forest, sara, temple and other government land that was encroached upon. The opposition's argument will focus on this being a "major humanitarian crisis", involving the demolition of houses for people forced to camp on the streets, with many not only losing their homes but livelihoods, too.

Crackdown on child marriage: Measures against child marriage leading to the arrest of many, and booking them under the POCSO Act, will also be a significant issue in the upcoming polls. The ruling alliance will claim it is a major step towards eradicating the social menace, while the opposition will try to corner the dispensation for again "targeting the Muslim community" in the state.

Development projects/welfare schemes: The state government will highlight the major development projects in Assam, particularly the infrastructure initiatives in roads, railways, new airports, waterways, the Tata semiconductor unit and various other agreements signed during the second edition of the 'Advantage Assam' business summit. The opposition's counter will be that development has taken place in select areas, and at the cost of indigenous people, whose lands have been allegedly acquired for the purpose. The Assam government's various welfare schemes for women, including distribution of ₹ 1,250 monthly, benefits for women entrepreneurs and health initiatives would be underscored by the BJP and its allies, with women constituting nearly 50 per cent of the electorate. The opposition's contention is that crimes against women have not declined, and the distribution of benefits has been partial.

The BJP-led alliance will also highlight the recruitment drive in various government departments, which has led to the appointment of over 1.6 lakh youths. It will also try to capitalise on benefits extended to members of the tea gardens, which comprises a sizeable vote bank and were traditionally supporters of the Congress, but shifted their allegiance to the BJP since 2016.

Zubeen Garg's death: Another issue that grabbed headlines was popular singer Zubeen Garg's death in Singapore in September, 2025, and the subsequent demand for justice for those accused in his alleged murder. The opposition parties will allege that the BJP government is not keen to ensure justice for the singer, while the ruling dispensation will highlight that it constituted an SIT, arrested the accused and the matter is now in the court. The 126-member Assam assembly has 64 MLAs from the BJP while its allies AGP has nine members, UPPL seven and the Bodo Peoples' Front (BPF) has three MLAs. The opposition Congress has 26 members, AIUDF 15, while there is one from the CPI(M) and an Independent MLA. (PTI)

All eyes on

Bora had represented the Gohpur assembly constituency twice in 2001 and 2006. He was also a cabinet minister in the Tarun Gogoi ministry. Bora will contest from the Barchalla assembly constituency in the ensuing polls.

Ajanta Neog: The first woman finance minister of Assam, Neog holds the record of being the longest-serving female legislator in the state for five consecutive terms since 2001, representing Golaghat constituency. She was earlier a Congress minister in Tarun Gogoi's two cabinets from 2006 and 2011. She quit the Congress and joined the BJP in 2020 and was made the finance minister in Sarma's cabinet in 2021.

Atul Bora: A minister in both the BJP governments in Assam, Bora is the president of the Asom Gana Parishad, a constituent of the NDA. He is currently the minister of agriculture, horticulture and food processing, animal husbandry and veterinary.

A former member of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) during the anti-foreigners' agitation, he represented the Golaghat constituency from 1996 to 2001 but shifted to nearby Bokakhat in 2016, from where he was elected twice. He was also a minister in the AGP government, led by Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, in the 1996-2001 period.

Keshab Mahanta: A minister in both the BJP governments in Assam, Mahanta has been the working president of the AGP and has represented the Kaliabor assembly constituency since 2006. He was also elected to the Lok Sabha as an AGP candidate in 1996 and was an MP till 1998. He is currently the minister for revenue, science and technology and information and technology departments in the Sarma cabinet.

Akhil Gogoi: He is the president of the Rajor Dal, formed in 2020 after the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). He won from Sivasagar assembly constituency as an independent candidate in the 2021 polls while he was still in jail on sedition charges for allegedly instigating violence during the protests.

Aminul Islam: Three-term AIUDF MLA, Islam was arrested on April 24 last year from his residence in Dhing following controversial remarks regarding the Pahalgam terror attack. He was granted bail, but was arrested again under the National Security Act (NSA) on May 15.

The charge was quashed by the Gauhati High Court in November, and he was subsequently released from jail. He has represented the Dhing constituency since 2011, but has been shifted to Rupahihat for the upcoming polls. (PTI)

Jalukbari, Jorhat among

minister. He is likely to contest the seat in the coming polls.

PANERY: A stronghold of the Bodo tribe, the constituency has been represented by the outgoing assembly's Speaker Biswajit Daimary. He represented the seat as a candidate for both the Bodoland Peoples' Front (BPF) and the BJP.

KOKRAJHAR: As a newly constituted assembly seat following the 2023 delimitation exercise, Kokrajhar is likely to garner attention. The BPF has an advantage but the other NDA ally, the United Peoples' Party Liberal (UPPL), may also put up a candidate there.

BARPETA: Earlier a minority-dominated constituency, its demographics were realigned during the delimitation exercise. The seat is currently represented by Congress' Abdul Rahim Ahmed but the party has named Mahananda Sarkar as its candidate for the forthcoming polls.

SILCHAR: In the Barak Valley, Silchar is a prominent constituency that was once the stronghold of the late Congress leader Santosh Mohan Dev and was represented by his wife Bithika Dev and daughter Sushmita Dev, who is currently a TMC MP. The BJP also had a considerably influence in the constituency, comprising mostly Bengali Hindus, and has retained the seat since 2016.

SAMAGURI: A stronghold of Dhabri Lok Sabha Congress MP Rakibul Hussain, who represented the constituency for five consecutive terms. BJP's Dipu Ranjan Sarma, however, wrested it from his son Tanzil Hussain during the by-elections necessitated by the senior Hussain's election to Parliament. Congress has given Tanzil the ticket again for the coming polls.

BARCHALLA: A prominent constituency in the northern bank of the Brahmaputra, Barchalla has been represented by BJP's Ganesh Kumar Limbu for the last two terms, since 2016. Former Congress Rajya Sabha member, Assam minister and party's state unit president Ripun Bora will be the opposition candidate from the seat in the upcoming polls.

DISPUR: A prestigious constituency, comprising parts of Guwahati city and its suburbs, Dispur has been represented by BJP's Atul Bora for two terms since 2016. He also represented the seat from 1985 to 1996 as an AGP candidate and was a powerful minister in Prafulla Kumar Mahanta's first ministry. The Congress gave the ticket to its Pradesh Mahila Congress President Mira Borthakur who had unsuccessfully contested the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. She was earlier in the BJP but joined the Congress after the CAA protests in 2019. (PTI)

AMRUT 2.0 project aims to provide safe drinking water to over 10,000 households

Bhumi puja for Haflong water supply project held

HT Correspondent

HAFLONG, March 15: The Bhumi Puja ceremony for the Haflong Town Water Supply Project under the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) 2.0 was held on Sunday at Lal Field, Haflong. The programme was organised by the Department of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of Assam, marking a significant step towards strengthening urban water supply infrastructure and ensuring safe drinking water for the residents of Haflong.

Speaking on the occasion, Executive Member of NCHAC Donpoin Thaoson highlighted the long-standing issue of water scarcity in Haflong, recalling his own experiences during his early days. He expressed confidence that the new water supply project will provide a lasting solution to the Haflong water crisis. "Water scarcity in Haflong has been a per-



sistent issue faced by all Haflongites. I am sure this project will finally resolve the problem," he said. Despite heavy downpour, the programme continued smoothly to its logical conclusion.

Mission Director AMRUT Samprity Goswami, ACS, said the project

cost is approximately ₹ 100 crore and will generate 7 million litres of water daily, significantly improving the town's water supply capacity.

The Haflong Town Water Supply Project under AMRUT 2.0 has been designed with a comprehen-

sive scope to benefit 10,086 households through House Service Connections (HSCs). The project will ensure 24x7 access to safe drinking water.

The source of water will be drawn from surface sources, supported by a Water Treatment Plant (WTP) of 7.0 MLD capacity. To ensure efficient distribution, the project includes the laying of a 70.25 km pipeline network across the town.

The event was graced by several dignitaries including Executive Member NCHAC Donpoin Thaoson (i/c Finance, Town and Country Planning, Education), Executive Member Probita Johori, MAC Prunath Rajyung, Principal Secretary Partha Jahari, ACS, Chairman of the Municipal Board Ripa Hojai, Mission Director AMRUT Samprity Goswami, ACS, Joint Secretary NCHAC Rebecca Changsan, heads of various departments and others.

Former UPPL leader Sanjoy Narzary joins BPF

Move seen as setback for UPPL ahead of Assembly elections



HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, March 15: Ahead of the Assembly elections, the UPPL party has faced a major setback across the districts of the Bodoland Territorial Region.

On Sunday, a joining ceremony was held at Deepalaibil in the newly formed Baokhungri Assembly constituency of Kokrajhar district in the presence of BPF MCLA Dhaneswar Goary and under the chairmanship

of Baokhungri TCLCC president Kamaleswar Boro. At the event, former TCLCC chairman of the UPPL government in Baokhungri constituency, Sanjoy Narzary, along with 150 UPPL leaders and workers, formally joined the BPF party led by Hagrama Mohilary.

The joining of Sanjoy Narzary, a former central treasurer of ABSU and an influential leader from Baokhungri constituency, after leaving the UPPL has created a major

political setback for the UPPL party led by Pramod Boro ahead of the upcoming Assembly elections.

It may be mentioned that Sanjoy Narzary told the media that although he had worked tirelessly to strengthen the UPPL party base and organisation in Baokhungri constituency, he did not receive proper importance from the party leadership. Because of this, he decided to leave the UPPL and join the BPF party.

Ramesh Bordoloi resigns from Cong

HT Correspondent

MORIGAON, March 15: Former Chief Executive Member (CEM) of the Tiwa Autonomous Council (TAC), former secretary of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) and former president of the Morigaon District Congress Committee (MDCC), Ramesh Bordoloi has resigned from the primary membership of the Indian National Congress (INC) following the publication of the party's second candidate list for the 2026 Assembly elections.

Bordoloi alleged that he had been deprived of rightful recognition within the party.

Ramesh Bordoloi has already sent his resignation letter to the general secretary of the All India Congress Committee (AICC) and Assam in-charge Jitendra Singh. Bordoloi had served the party for nearly 30 years.

ABITA lauds Assam govt support to tea sector

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, March 15: The Assam Branch of the Indian Tea Association (ABITA) has lauded the state government for its support towards the industry that has addressed the evolving needs of the tea sector.

Speaking at the 135th Annual General Meeting of the Assam Branch of the Indian Tea Association at the Jorhat Gymkhana Club on Saturday evening, Vice Chairman of the Indian Tea Association Suneel Sikand

pointed out that the Assam Tea Industries Special Incentives Scheme (ATISIS) has in particular, provided a vital lifeline by extending key incentives such as interest subvention on working capital loans and subsidies on orthodox tea production, thereby offering much-needed financial support to the sector.

"The effectiveness of this initiative is reflected in our recent performance indicators, with exports reaching 280.4 million kgs, propelled by a robust 23 per cent growth in North India shipments," the ITA vice chairman added.

Book 'A ZigZag Mind' launched at Dibrugarh University



HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, March 15: An enriching literary evening celebrating art, culture and intellectual discourse was held at Dibrugarh University with the launch of the book 'A ZigZag Mind' by renowned classical dancer, thinker and author Dr Sonal Mansingh.

The event was held at the Indira Miri Convention Hall on the Dibrugarh University campus.

The programme was presented by the Prabha Khaitan Foundation with support from Oil India Limited under the foundation's literary initiative Kitab in association with Dibrugarh University.

ASJU demand to confer Bharat Ratna posthumously to Zubeen Garg

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, March 15: The Assam State Journalists Union (ASJU) on Sunday in an executive meeting held in Bhogeswari Phukanani Indoor Stadium complex in Dispur, took a number of resolutions to strengthen the journalists body. The executive meeting, presided over by state president Jitu Sharma Rajkhowa, renewed their demand to bestow the Bharat Ratna Award posthumously to musical legend Zubeen Garg.

The meeting directed the district units to renew the district committees by March 3 and next biennial state conference will be held in September next. The state commit-



tee also directed the units to pay their dues before the date. Pradip Deka, secretary, spoke on the objectives and suggested new steps to strengthen the organisation. Two districts Dibrugarh and Guwahati Urban have applied for next biennial session and the final selection will be finalised later. The commit-

tee formed a four member Election Committee with Advocate Rajiv Ahmed as Chief Election Officer and Advocate Medini Kamal Bora, executive president Manoj Kumar Borthakur and founder secretary Ratul Bora as members. Advocate Rajiv Ahmed said that the media correspondents often get entangled in legal cases for the media houses they represent.

Others that attended the meeting were Abhijit Duwora, Jitu Kalita, Sanjeev Deka, Hildol Borgohain, Dhruvajyoti Baruah, Dwijendra Narayan Dutta, Pabitra Gogoi, Mahjuddin Ahmed, Udijit Buragohain, Amal Nath and Pranob Borgohain.

Bhupen Hazarika Kalatirtha virtually inaugurated at Nagaon



HT Correspondent

NAGAON, March 15: The Bhupen Hazarika Kalatirtha, a cultural center was virtually inaugurated in Nagaon town on Sunday.

The inauguration was carried out by Chandra Mohan Patowary, Minister of Parliamentary Affairs, on behalf of Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma.

Speaking at the site in Nagaon town, local MLA Rupak Sarma said that the long-cherished dream of Nagaon residents has finally come true. The Kalatirtha will provide an opportunity for the new generation to learn about the life and works of Dr Bhupen Hazarika.

The Bhupen Hazarika Kalatirtha features a modern auditorium, museum, archive and exhibition hall and will serve as a hub for literary and cultural activities.

The project was constructed at a cost of ₹ 40 crore on a 20-acre plot, funded by the Urban Infrastructure Development Fund. The construction was carried out by UCN Construction Company Private Limited.

The event was attended by dignitaries, including the District Commissioner of Nagaon, Debashish Sarma and artist Kamal Katak. The audience joined in singing Dr Bhupen Hazarika's iconic song "Manuhor Manuhor Babe".

Workshop on early warning system held in Jorhat

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, March 15: A stakeholder consultation meeting-cum-workshop on the Multi-Hazard Early Warning System (MHEWS) was organised by the District Disaster Management Authority, Jorhat (DDMA Jorhat) in collaboration with the North-East Affected Area Development Society (NEADS), Roots to Branches Foundation, Inter Agency Group Assam (IAG Assam) and UNICEF Assam. The consultation was held at the conference hall of the Office of the District Commissioner, Jorhat.

The consultation aimed to orient

stakeholders on existing innovations and tools developed by the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) for disaster-related early warning. The workshop also sought feedback and suggestions from participants to improve community acceptance and strengthen anticipatory and early actions to reduce disaster-induced losses and damages.

The workshop was moderated by Additional Deputy Commissioner Sajiv Das, while Manoj Kumar Baruah, CEO of Zila Parishad, graced the occasion and emphasised the importance of coordinated efforts

between government institutions, civil society organisations and communities to strengthen disaster preparedness and response mechanisms at the district level.

The session on the way forward and open discussion was facilitated by Deborah Sangma from Roots to Branches Foundation, who encouraged active participation and dialogue among stakeholders to identify practical measures for strengthening early warning dissemination and preparedness at the community level. The consultation witnessed the participation of more than 50 participants.

New flyover opens in Gauripur, ending decades of traffic woes

HT Correspondent

DHUBRI, March 15: In a significant boost to connectivity in Lower Assam, Dhubri District Guardian Minister Ranjit Kumar Dass officially inaugurated the much-anticipated Gauripur railway flyover on Sunday. The new infrastructure is set to provide a permanent solution to the persistent traffic congestion that has long plagued the Dhubri-Gauripur route.

The flyover, spanning nearly one kilometre was constructed at an estimated cost of Rs 70 crore. The contract for the project was executed by the Doors Construction Company with work having commenced in 2023. For years, the railway crossing in the Bepari-patti area served as a major bottleneck for commuters. Frequent train movements led to prolonged closures of the level crossing, causing massive delays for res-

idents, emergency services and commercial transport moving between Dhubri and Gauripur.

The ceremony saw a gathering of several prominent local leaders and officials, reflecting the project's importance to the region. Key attendees included Nizanur Rahman, MLA of Gauripur, Dr Debamoy Sanyal, Chairman of the Dhubri Municipal Board and Jaya Biswas, Chairman of the Gauripur Municipal Board.

He noted that if the BJP returns to power in the upcoming assembly elections, the government remains committed to resolving the remaining developmental challenges within the Dhubri district.

The opening of the flyover is expected to not only reduce travel time but also stimulate local trade by ensuring the seamless flow of goods through the Bepari-patti corridor.

Rural youth trained to enhance leadership and community participation

'MY Bharat Yuva Mandal Vikas Abhiyan' programme held in Kheroni

HT Correspondent

KHERONI, March 15: A one-day awareness and capacity-building programme titled "MY Bharat Yuva Mandal Vikas Abhiyan" was successfully organised on Sunday by MY Bharat Kendra, Diphu, Karbi Anglong, under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Government of India. The event was held in collaboration with the Subaltern Development Club at Navodeep Higher Secondary School under Socheng Block.

The programme focused on integrating rural and marginalised youth into the mainstream of national development. It aimed to generate awareness, offer practical guidance and inspire active participation in social and economic progress, aligning with the broader goals of MY Bharat (Mera Yuva Bharat) to build a Viksit Bharat by 2047. The inaugural session was



chaired by Biresw Prasad, Principal of Navodeep Higher Secondary School. Distinguished speakers included Dr Rajesh Kumar Chauhan, Head of Department, TNB Col-

lege, who motivated young participants to contribute actively to nation-building; Chhotelal Chauhan, Head of Department, Kapiili College, who urged rural youth to be-

come resourceful individuals and work selflessly for the betterment of society and Jeetendra Harijan, Vice Principal of Kapili College, who delivered a detailed session on the formation and management of youth clubs, including essential aspects of bookkeeping and record maintenance.

More than 50 youths from various villages and existing youth clubs across Socheng Block enthusiastically participated in the programme.

Organisers expressed hope that such initiatives will strengthen grassroots youth leadership and foster greater community involvement in developmental activities across the region.

This event is part of ongoing efforts under the MY Bharat Yuva Mandal Vikas Abhiyan to empower young citizens in rural and tribal areas of Assam.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

The secret of happiness is something to do.
- John Burroughs

Appellate tribunals for disputed WB voters

It is not a tough proposition to decipher the reasons for Supreme Court asking Calcutta High Court Chief Justice Sujoy Paul on March 10 to form special appellate tribunals with former high court judges to examine the appeals filed by those excluded from Bengal's voter list during the SIR, each to be headed by a former chief justice of Calcutta High Court. The apex court might not have come out with nature of order if it had not been in receipt of the information that the judicial officers appointed in compliance to its February 24 order were facing significant technical and logistical issues. The Court issued a stern warning against attempts to undermine the integrity of judicial officers handling the massive, rapid voter list revisions, treating such moves as an affront to the judiciary. The SC directed that the ECI must bear all costs associated with these tribunals, including honorariums for the judicial officers involved. This decision of the apex court comes amid allegations that the special intensive revision (SIR) exercise in West Bengal was flawed and potentially used to disenfranchise the Muslims, and declare them as foreign nationals.

The seriousness of the situation could be made out from CJI Surya Kant observation: "We are doubting the bona fides of both sides." The Supreme Court was also conscious of absence of an independent appellate mechanism. It has cautioned that the ECI about its authority with the remark that it does not enjoy unchecked authority while conducting Special Intensive Revisions (SIR) of electoral rolls, observing that any such exercise must remain anchored in constitutional principles and natural justice. Irrefutably the reluctance of the Chief Election Commissioner, Gyanesh Kumar to ensure that people are not denied of their right to vote primarily forced the apex court issue this order. This simply manifests frustration of the apex court to reluctance of Gyanesh to abide by its order of February 24, wherein it had directed the Commission to render all help to the judicial officers deputed to screen the voters' list and remove the discrepancies. Notwithstanding a clear directive from CJI Surya Kant, the chief electoral officer of Bengal, obviously at the directive of CEC, issued a circular, in utter violation of apex court order, saying all appeals should be marked to him and that he would decide them.

The creation of this body serves as a mechanism to address complaints of "dirty games" or partisan behaviour within the electoral machinery, providing a legal recourse beyond the internal review by Election Commission, which has consistently defended its processes of putting these voters under the category of logical discrepancy, asserting that its actions are guided by law and aimed at ensuring an accurate, transparent, and non-partisan electoral roll.

Post Bag

Antidote to political tokenism

On the account of Kanshiramji 92nd birthday, we reflect on a legacy that redefined Indian democracy. Kanshiram didn't just build a party he engineered a consciousness shift. By transforming Scheduled identities into a unified Bahujan collective he weaponized the census to challenge systemic hegemony. His creative genius lay in the Ambedkar Mela on Wheels, using art & emotion to bypass literacy barriers & stir the grassroots. Most fascinating was his radical sacrifice vowing never to own property or marry ensuring his only inheritance was the movement itself. Today as his vision feels adrift we must revive his Pay Back to Society ethos. His blueprint for self reliance remains the only antidote to political tokenism.

Dr Vijaykumar H K

Assam celebrates a chess hero: Mayank Chakraborty reaches grandmaster glory

A quiet town in Assam woke up to extraordinary news when a teenager turned a lifelong dream into reality. Seventeen year old Mayank Chakraborty earned the title of Grandmaster, becoming the ninety fourth player from India to achieve that honour. The achievement carried a special meaning for an entire region because he also became the first Grandmaster from Assam and the first from the whole North East of India. For people who follow chess in the country, the announcement felt like a proud moment for Indian sport. For families and young players across Assam, it felt personal.

The journey that led to this milestone unfolded thousands of kilometres away from home. In Sweden, during the Hotel Stockholm North by First Hotels Chess Talents Tournament, Mayank produced one of the strongest performances of his career. The tournament brought together skilled players from several countries, each hoping to climb higher in the world of chess. For a young player from India, the pressure was immense. Every game carried the weight of years of preparation and expectation.

Mayank approached the tournament with calm focus. Over nine rounds he displayed remarkable consistency. Six victories, two draws and only one loss helped him finish with seven points out of nine. The performance placed him firmly at the top of the standings. More important than the tournament victory was the result that followed. With those games he secured his final Grandmaster norm and crossed the crucial rating barrier of 2500 set by the international chess federation FIDE. The result confirmed what many coaches and observers had predicted for years. India had a new Grandmaster and the North East had its first.

The decisive moment came in the eighth round of the tournament. Mayank faced Swedish International Master Philip Lindgren. The game demanded deep calculation and patience. Spectators watching the match sensed that the young Indian was in command of the board. With steady moves he built pressure until the position favoured him. When Lindgren finally resigned, Mayank moved one step closer to history. The victory pushed his score high enough to secure the final norm required for the Grandmaster title.

The final round brought another tense contest. Across the board sat English International Master Jonah B Willow. Both players fought for control during a complex game that tested endurance and concentration. The game ended in a draw after an intense struggle. For Mayank, that result sealed his place as the champion of the tournament and confirmed the most memorable achievement of his career.

News of his success travelled quickly across India. In Assam, chess enthusiasts celebrated with excitement and pride. The

region has produced talented athletes in several sports such as boxing, football and athletics. Chess had never seen a Grandmaster from the region until that moment. Young players who had been quietly studying openings and tactics suddenly saw a clear path toward the top levels of the sport.

Mayank's story carries the familiar elements of talent, dedication and family support. Born and raised in Guwahati, he developed an interest in chess during early childhood. Many parents introduce their children to chess as a hobby, hoping it will sharpen their thinking. For Mayank, the board quickly became a place of fascination. The game allowed him to explore patterns, strategies and possibilities that seemed endless.

Coaches noticed his natural understanding of the game. Even at a young age he displayed patience and creativity during competitions. Local tournaments became his training ground. Each event added experience and confidence. Soon he began competing at the national level where the competition grew stronger.

His rise through age group tournaments came quickly. He earned a national silver medal in the Under nine category, followed by a national gold medal in the Under eleven division. These early successes signalled that a remarkable career might be ahead. International competitions soon followed.

At the Asian Youth Chess Championship held in Sri Lanka, Mayank captured a silver medal in the Under ten category. Competing against talented players from several countries gave him valuable exposure. Every tournament helped him understand how top players approach the game.

A major turning point arrived in 2021 when he gained opportunities to compete in Europe. The European chess circuit is known for strong tournaments where ambitious young players test their skills against experienced opponents. For Mayank the experience was transformative. Facing international players forced him to refine his preparation and strengthen his mental resilience.

During that period his Elo rating climbed rapidly. Ratings are a crucial measure in chess because they reflect the strength of a player's performance. Mayank's rating jumped from the eighteen hundreds to close to twenty two hundred. Such progress within a short period drew attention from the chess community. He also reached the sixth position in the world ranking for boys born in 2009 or later. The achievement placed him among the most promising young players of his generation.

In 2024 he achieved the title of International Master. The title itself requires strong

tournament results and high ratings. Many players spend years chasing that milestone. For Mayank it served as a stepping stone toward the ultimate goal of becoming a Grandmaster.

The Grandmaster title is one of the highest honours in chess. Players must achieve three Grandmaster norms in strong tournaments and cross the 2500 rating mark. Each norm demands exceptional performance against experienced opponents. Many talented players fall short of the requirements even after years of effort. Reaching that level at seventeen is a remarkable accomplishment.

His final performance in Sweden reflected maturity and composure. Observers noted his careful preparation and ability to remain calm under pressure. In several games he converted small advantages into victories with impressive precision. His style combines sharp calculation with positional understanding, qualities that often define elite chess players.

Behind his achievements stands a family that believed deeply in his dreams. His mother Monomita Chakraborty is a doctor who supported his training and studies with dedication. His father made a significant sacrifice by leaving his job so that he could accompany Mayank to tournaments around the world. Chess careers often require constant travel and intense schedules. Having family members who share the journey can make an enormous difference for a young player.

The support system around him also includes coaches and mentors who guided his development. Training sessions often involve analysing classic games, solving complex puzzles and preparing for specific opponents. Chess may appear quiet from the outside, though the mental effort behind every move is immense.

India's chess culture has grown dramatically over the past few decades. A major influence on this growth came from legendary Grandmaster Viswanathan Anand. His world championship victories inspired an entire generation of players. Chess academies began appearing across the country. Young students started studying the game with professional seriousness.

As a result India now produces a steady stream of strong players. The number of Grandmasters has risen steadily each year. Mayank's achievement brings the national total to ninety four. The number reflects how deeply the sport has taken root across different regions of the country.

What makes Mayank's success unique is the region he represents. The North East of India is known for its vibrant culture and sporting spirit. Many athletes from the region have excelled in boxing, weightlifting

and football. Chess development had been slower due to limited training infrastructure and fewer tournaments.

His success offers a powerful message for young players across the region. Talent can flourish anywhere with determination and support. Schools and sports organisations in Assam have already begun encouraging students to take interest in chess. The story of a local teenager reaching the highest title in the sport has sparked fresh enthusiasm.

Chess carries benefits that extend far beyond competition. The game strengthens concentration, memory and analytical thinking. Many educators believe that learning chess helps students develop patience and problem solving abilities. Each game becomes a lesson in decision making and responsibility.

Mayank's journey reflects those values. Hours spent studying positions and analysing mistakes shaped his growth as a player. Every defeat offered a chance to improve. Every victory strengthened his belief in the path he had chosen.

As he steps into the circle of Grandmasters, new challenges will appear. The global chess scene includes many formidable opponents. Tournaments become tougher and expectations rise. For a young Grandmaster the journey is only beginning.

Observers believe that Mayank has the potential to achieve even greater heights. His age allows him time to refine his skills and gain experience in elite competitions. With continued dedication he could become a regular contender in major international events.

For the people of Assam his achievement will remain a landmark moment. It shows how dreams nurtured in quiet corners of the country can reach the world stage. A chessboard placed on a simple table in a small room can open doors to global recognition.

Stories like his remind us that success in sport often begins with curiosity and perseverance. A young boy learning the moves of the pieces gradually becomes a master of strategy. Each move carries the weight of careful thought. Each victory adds a new chapter to the journey.

Today Mayank Chakraborty stands as a symbol of possibility for thousands of aspiring players. His name joins the list of Indian Grandmasters who have shaped the country's presence in world chess. From Guwahati to Stockholm, his journey reflects dedication, family support and the quiet power of patience.

The sixty four squares of the chessboard may appear small, though within that space countless stories unfold. One of those stories now belongs to a teenager from Assam who dared to dream and worked tirelessly to achieve it. The moment he became India's ninety fourth Grandmaster will remain a proud memory for his state and for the entire nation.

Power of mother tongue in intellectual awakening

By: Himanshu Ranjan Bhuyan

Mother tongue occupies a fundamental place in the life of every human being, shaping the earliest expressions of thought, emotion, and intellectual awareness. The language that a child naturally acquires from the family environment and social surroundings soon after birth becomes the first medium through which the world is understood. This language, absorbed effortlessly through daily interaction with parents, relatives, and the community, forms the primary structure of knowledge within the child's mind. Through the mother tongue, the child begins to perceive objects, interpret experiences, and communicate feelings. Linguists and educationists across the world have long emphasized that intellectual development is deeply connected with the language in which a child first learns to think. Because the mother tongue is closely connected with the child's mental processes, it serves as the most effective medium through which new ideas and complex concepts can be understood. Knowledge transmitted through the mother tongue does not create psychological barriers; instead, it enters the mind naturally and stimulates curiosity. This natural understanding encourages questioning, reflection, and analysis, which are essential elements of intellectual growth. As the child gradually develops the ability to observe and interpret reality through the mother tongue, a strong cognitive foundation is established that supports further learning and creativity.

Early education plays a decisive role in shaping the intellectual capacity of a child, and the language used in this stage of learning significantly influences the development of reasoning and comprehension. When education is imparted through the mother tongue, the child is able to grasp ideas more clearly because the language itself is al-

ready familiar and emotionally meaningful. Subjects such as science, mathematics, social studies, and moral education often contain abstract and complex ideas that require deep understanding. When these ideas are explained in the child's own language, the process of comprehension becomes far more effective. The child does not struggle with the language itself and therefore can concentrate fully on understanding the subject matter. Words and sentence structures of the mother tongue resonate naturally with the child's mind, allowing knowledge to be received without unnecessary effort. As a result, intellectual energy is directed toward analyzing information, exploring connections between ideas, and forming independent conclusions. This analytical process gradually strengthens logical thinking and problem-solving abilities.

On the other hand, when children are compelled to learn through a foreign language during the early stages of education, they often face considerable mental challenges. Before understanding the subject itself, they must first struggle to interpret the language in which the information is presented. This additional burden can disrupt the natural learning process and create confusion in the child's mind. Limited vocabulary and unfamiliar grammatical patterns make it difficult to grasp the deeper meaning of concepts. In many cases, learning becomes reduced to rote memorization rather than genuine understanding. Such a system restricts intellectual curiosity and prevents the development of independent thinking. Education that depends heavily on memorization does not encourage questioning or creativity, which are essential for the growth of a reflective and analytical mind. Therefore, the use of the mother tongue in early education is not merely a cultural preference but a pedagogical necessity that

supports healthy cognitive development.

Beyond intellectual comprehension, the mother tongue also plays a vital role in shaping emotional awareness and personal confidence. Human emotions are closely linked with language, and the language of childhood often becomes the most powerful medium for expressing feelings. A child can communicate hopes, fears, joys, and concerns most naturally in the mother tongue. Conversations within the family—filled with affection, guidance, and emotional warmth—create a sense of security in the child's mind. This emotional stability is crucial for the development of confidence and self-respect. When a child grows up in an environment where thoughts and emotions can be freely expressed in a familiar language, the mind becomes open and receptive to new experiences. Such an atmosphere nurtures psychological well-being and strengthens the ability to interact socially with others.

Language is also the carrier of culture, and through the mother tongue a child becomes connected with the traditions, values, and social practices of the community. Stories told by elders, folk songs sung in family gatherings, and traditional sayings shared in everyday conversation carry deep cultural meanings. These expressions transmit knowledge about moral values, social responsibility, and collective identity. When children learn through the mother tongue, they naturally absorb these cultural elements and develop a sense of belonging to their society. This connection between language and culture helps form a strong intellectual identity, enabling individuals to understand their place within the larger social framework. Without this connection, education may appear detached from lived experiences, making it difficult for learners to relate academic knowledge to real life.

Creativity and imagination also flourish most effectively

through the mother tongue. The richness of vocabulary, idioms, metaphors, and expressive forms within a native language stimulates the imaginative faculty of the mind. When children listen to stories, read literature, or engage in creative writing in their mother tongue, they experience language not merely as a tool of communication but as a medium of artistic expression. Literature composed in the mother tongue often reflects the landscapes, traditions, and emotional experiences familiar to the reader. This familiarity allows the imagination to move freely and encourages the creation of original ideas. Poetry, storytelling, and dramatic expression in the mother tongue nurture aesthetic sensitivity and deepen emotional understanding. Through such experiences, children gradually develop the confidence to express their own ideas in unique ways.

Creative thinking is closely related to intellectual independence. A person who can express ideas freely is more likely to question established beliefs and explore new perspectives. The mother tongue provides the linguistic freedom necessary for such intellectual exploration. When learners attempt to express complex ideas in an unfamiliar language, they may hesitate or restrict their thoughts because of limited vocabulary or grammatical uncertainty. In contrast, the mother tongue allows spontaneous expression without fear of linguistic errors. This freedom strengthens the ability to think critically and to develop new interpretations of knowledge. Such intellectual independence is essential in fields ranging from literature and philosophy to science and technology, where innovation depends on the courage to think differently.

The importance of the mother tongue extends beyond individual development to the collective progress of society. A society that values education in its own language creates opportunities for

knowledge to reach all sections of the population. When scientific, technological, and philosophical knowledge becomes available in the mother tongue, it no longer remains limited to a small group proficient in foreign languages. Instead, knowledge spreads more widely, enabling people from diverse economic and social backgrounds to participate in intellectual activities. This democratization of knowledge strengthens social equality and promotes inclusive development. Citizens who can access information in their own language are better equipped to understand social issues, participate in public discourse, and contribute to the progress of the nation.

Research and higher education conducted in the mother tongue also encourage the exploration of local problems and the search for practical solutions. Scholars who work in their native language often find it easier to connect academic theories with real-life experiences within their communities. This connection inspires innovative ideas that address regional challenges in agriculture, healthcare, environmental management, and social development. Many advanced nations have successfully used their native languages as mediums of education and research, proving that intellectual progress does not depend solely on global languages. Instead, the strength of a nation's knowledge system lies in its ability to develop ideas rooted in its own linguistic and cultural context.

At the same time, the significance of the mother tongue does not diminish the importance of learning other languages. In the contemporary world, communication across cultures has become essential for sharing knowledge and participating in global exchanges. Languages such as English often serve as international mediums for science, technology, and diplomacy. However, the learning of additional languages becomes more effective when the foundation of

the mother tongue is strong. Cognitive research has shown that children who develop strong literacy skills in their native language can transfer those skills to learning other languages more easily. The mental structures used for understanding grammar, organizing ideas, and interpreting meaning in the mother tongue help learners adapt to new linguistic systems. Thus, the mother tongue acts as a bridge rather than a barrier in the acquisition of global languages.

Educational policies should therefore aim to balance the use of the mother tongue with opportunities to learn other languages. The early stages of education must prioritize learning through the mother tongue to ensure clear comprehension and emotional comfort. As learners progress to higher levels of education, additional languages can be gradually introduced as tools for accessing wider sources of knowledge. Such an approach not only strengthens intellectual development but also preserves cultural heritage while encouraging global interaction. Teachers play a crucial role in this process, as they must create learning environments where students feel proud of their linguistic identity while remaining open to new ideas from the wider world.

Modern educational systems also need to invest in developing high-quality resources in mother-tongue languages. Textbooks, digital learning materials, research publications, and academic journals must be available in native languages so that learners can explore knowledge without linguistic barriers. Translating important scientific and literary works into the mother tongue can further enrich intellectual life and encourage scholarly engagement. At the same time, original writing and research in the mother tongue should be promoted to ensure that knowledge continues to grow within the language itself. When a language becomes capa-

ble of expressing modern scientific and philosophical ideas, it strengthens both cultural pride and intellectual confidence.

The awakening of intellectual power within individuals ultimately depends on the ability to think freely and express ideas clearly. The mother tongue nurtures this freedom by providing a linguistic environment in which thoughts can develop naturally. From childhood conversations within the family to advanced academic discussions in educational institutions, the mother tongue serves as the thread connecting knowledge, culture, and personal identity. Through this language, individuals discover their creative potential and develop the capacity to contribute meaningfully to society.

Recognition of the mother tongue as a vital instrument of intellectual awakening carries significant implications for the future of education and cultural preservation. When societies respect and promote their native languages, they not only safeguard their cultural heritage but also strengthen the intellectual resources of their people. Education rooted in the mother tongue encourages critical thinking, emotional balance, and social responsibility. It allows knowledge to grow from the soil of lived experience while remaining open to the influences of global learning.

Ultimately, the power of the mother tongue lies in its ability to unite thought, emotion, and identity into a coherent whole. It gives individuals the confidence to explore ideas, challenge assumptions, and create new knowledge. Intellectual awakening begins when the mind is free to think in the language that resonates most deeply with its experiences. By nurturing education through the mother tongue, societies cultivate generations of thoughtful, creative, and confident individuals capable of shaping a more enlightened future. *(The author is the recipient of the 'Yuba Lekhak Sanman - 2025' from the Government of Assam)*

The Question of Bond-ed Medical Labour in India

By: K. S. Uplabdh Gopal

India has enlarged its medical education system at a pace few sectors in Indian public policy can match. As of December 2025, the country had 818 medical colleges, 1,28,875 MBBS* seats, and 82,059 postgraduate (MD/MS*) seats. That expansion has not softened the old argument about what the state may ask in return for subsidised training. In many states, and now in some institutions through recent circulars, medical education in the public system is tied to compulsory service bonds. Yet this is not a single policy applied uniformly across one profession. An MBBS bond can usually be defended as a way of placing newly qualified generalists in government facilities that struggle to recruit. A bond imposed after MD or MS training, and especially after DM* or MCh*, carries a different weight. By that stage, the state is intervening much later in a doctor's professional life, when years of training have accumulated, specialisation has narrowed options, and choices about work, income, and family have become more difficult to defer.

The defence of this system is based on a real public problem. The Union government now places India's doctor-population ratio at 1:811, but that figure includes AYUSH* practitioners and assumes that 80 percent of registered doctors are actually available for service. The more difficult issue is distribution. A peer-reviewed analysis of national survey data from 2021 found that rural India had about 66 percent of the population in 2018 but only 33 percent of health workers, with only 27 percent of doctors located in rural areas; it also found that 65 percent of doctors worked in the private sector.

Much of India's bond regime, therefore, looks less like a settled workforce policy than an attempt to manage public sector scarcity through compulsion while treating state subsidy as if it automatically creates a broad claim over a doctor's labour.

Administrative data points in the same direction. The latest Health Dynamics of India 2022-23 report (published in 2024) points to a severe specialist deficit at rural Community Health Centres (CHCs). As of 31 March 2023, only 4,413 specialists were in position against a requirement of 21,964, implying a shortfall of 79.9 percent. This is the setting in which service bonds are defended. The concern is valid, but the instrument's utility remains doubtful because a bond may secure a posting for a period, but it does not by itself create the conditions that make doctors stay. Bonds also vary by state. Much of India's bond regime, therefore, looks less like a settled workforce policy than an attempt to manage public sector scarcity through compulsion while treating state subsidy as if it

automatically creates a broad claim over a doctor's labour.

Service Bonds Beyond India India is not unusual in linking publicly supported medical education to some form of service obligation. What stands out is how differently other countries tend to structure that bargain. Australia's Bonded Medical Programme offers a Commonwealth-supported place in return for 156 weeks of service in eligible regional, rural, or remote areas, under a single national scheme with standard rules and a defined completion pathway. South Africa folds obligation into the early career ladder itself, with doctors having to complete a two-year internship followed by one year of paid community service before they can register for independent practice. Japan's regional quota model similarly ties admission and scholarship support to later service in home prefectures, often for around nine years, with rural placement built into the design. The comparison below shows that India is not alone in linking training to service (Table 1).

Table 1: Comparing Medical Service Obligation Models Across Countries

Country	Programme	Core Design	What the Evidence Suggests
Australia	Bonded Medical Programme	National scheme; 156 weeks (3 years); Return of Service Obligation (RoSO) in eligible regional or remote locations; participant self-management via a web portal; completion required within 18 years; grounded in national legislation and rules.	Rural workforce studies suggest rural origin and rural clinical training drive rural practice more reliably than bonding alone, implying bonding works best as a complement to training pipelines.
South Africa	Internship + Community Service (ICSP)	National requirement: 24 months internship + 12 months paid community service in the public sector; community service linked to progression to independent practice via regulator processes.	A longitudinal review finds that the programme largely achieved redistribution and professional development goals, though longer-term rural retention remains sensitive to post conditions and support.
Thailand	Compulsory Service + CPIRD/ODOD Tracks	National medical workforce instrument; normal track includes 3-year compulsory service with a fine; CPIRD or Collaborative Project to Increase Production of Rural Doctors (3-year obligation) and ODOD or One District One Doctor (12-year obligation tied to scholarship) recruit rural students, train in public hospitals, and deploy through regulated placement.	National analysis reports higher retention in the Ministry of Public Health service for rural recruitment tracks (78.2% than the normal track (52.5%); with most retained doctors staying in assigned provinces.
Japan	Regional Quota with Scholarship + Jichi/Model	Prefecture-medical school programmes; obligations commonly around 9 years tied to scholarship forgiveness; integrated admissions, rural-oriented education and prefectural assignment; monitored through physician census and programme tracking.	Cohort study reports very high contractual retention at 5 years and substantially higher likelihood of working in the least densely populated municipalities versus non-participants.
India	State and Institutional Service Bonds	Fragmented state-by-state rules; durations and penalties vary; enforcement can include financial penalties, document retention, and administrative controls.	Evidence base on retention is uneven; administrative reviews highlight weak monitoring and implementation gaps, while public-facility shortfalls and specialist vacancies persist despite expanded training capacity.

The important difference is institutional clarity. In these systems, the obligation is usually tied to a known employer, a defined geography, or a specific admissions track, and its results are studied against actual retention. The World Health Organization (WHO) 2021 guidelines on rural retention



points in the same direction. They emphasise policy packages that make rural work viable (training pathways, supportive supervision, infrastructure, and career progression) because coercive instruments alone tend to deliver short-term staffing with high turnover once the obligation ends.

The Price of a Medical Degree Training a doctor in a public institution costs far more than the tuition line suggests, because the bill includes teaching hospitals, faculty, laboratories, hostels, stipends, and clinical infrastructure. A stint in government service is presented as repayment in kind. In 2019, the Supreme Court of India held that service bonds are not, by their nature, unreasonable if the terms are made clear at admission, limited in duration, and accompanied by an exit option that is not arbitrary. It also declined to treat such bonds as forced labour under the Constitution, while cautioning that overly long tenures and punitive penalties can push the arrangement beyond what is fair and should be brought within sensible limits.

Bond rules are largely written and enforced by states and institutions, so the 'social contract' varies widely in length, coverage, enforcement, and price. This fragmentation has become a policy issue in its own right. In 2022, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare was reported to be working on guidelines in light of National Medical Commission feedback, including the Commission's view that routine bond burdens may offend basic fairness and that a rethink of the entire architecture is overdue. The courts have also begun examining edge cases that expose the underlying issue. In April 2025, the Supreme Court criticised states for imposing rural service bonds on All India Quota MBBS students and called for a uniform approach rather than state-by-state coercion.

The point still stands, however, that a national entrance and licensure ecosystem is hard to reconcile with a patchwork of state obligations, especially when graduates move across states and need predictable rules.

Doctors have long asked why service bonds attach to medical graduates while other publicly funded fields are not treated the same way, pointing to engineers, architects, scientists, and researchers. The counterpoint is that medicine has a distinctive training pipeline. Clinical competence is built inside hospitals, and much of that capacity is public, with the state acting not just as a funder but also as a major organiser of early-career posts and placements for doctors. That makes a service expectation easier to justify in principle than for a profession whose training and labour market are largely private (such as engineering). The point still stands, however, that a national entrance and licensure ecosystem is hard to reconcile with a patchwork of state obligations, especially when graduates move across states and need predictable rules.

Delhi has moved to a one-year mandatory service condition across undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) cohorts, with specified forfeiture amounts and a posting logic that treats bond service as a way to fill junior and senior resident vacancies in government facilities. Punjab went further in one iteration by requiring property-backed sureties for MBBS admissions, a clause the Punjab and Haryana High Court stayed after challenges that it would exclude stu-

dents without assets. Rajasthan has recently shown how sharply the price of exit can rise at the specialist level, revising PG bond penalties up to INR 1.5 crore for non-service in some specialties. Karnataka illustrates a different failure mode, where the state has had to clarify that colleges cannot hold back degree certificates or original documents for pending compulsory service, and policy amendments have reportedly exempted thousands because there were not enough sanctioned posts to place them. The Maharashtra government may also be mulling scraping its bond policy.

Administrators and some in-service cadres argue that bonds protect taxpayer subsidy and create an immediate staffing pipeline, especially where voluntary recruitment fails. Resident associations and many doctors argue that bonds are increasingly being used to compensate for weak workforce planning. In their view, governments mandate service while attaching an exit price or bond penalty that only some can realistically pay. A 2023 student survey study published in Cureus suggests that the disagreement is often rooted in day-to-day realities. Many respondents were not opposed to rural service itself but described it as hard to justify when their postings come with limited senior support, poor infrastructure, safety concerns, and unclear, non-transparent placement processes.

Many respondents were not opposed to rural service itself but described it as hard to justify when their postings come with limited senior support, poor infrastructure, safety concerns, and unclear, non-transparent placement processes.

India also does not have a single official, up-to-date repository of bond rules across states and medical colleges. For rules that can shape years of early career life, that level of opacity is hard to justify. A publicly maintained national repository of bond rules, updated annually and linked to seat matrices, would be a simple governance improvement. It would help applicants make informed choices and give researchers and policy-makers a clearer basis to evaluate whether bonds actually serve workforce goals. A bond can, in theory, protect some public value by ensuring that subsidised training yields some public service. The difficulty begins when the policy relies on a high exit cost that many cannot realistically pay. Then the bond begins to resemble a restriction rather than a fair exchange. Public funding can justify such a service obligation, but when compliance is driven by penalties, the policy moves away from reciprocity and edges toward compulsion. That makes a stronger case for a rethink, or at the very least a serious, evidence-led review of what bonds have actually delivered over the years in terms of staffing, retention, and service quality. (Courtesy: ORF)

Is everything we know about fat wrong? Experts debunk 4 myths

By: Yasemin Nicola Sakay

For decades, adipose tissue (or, in other words, body fat) has been seen as merely a "storage depot" the body uses for insulation and fuel. However, with more research, it has become apparent that fat is akin to an organ, producing hormones and communicating with the brain and the immune system via signals.

Although most people worry about the fat you can pinch on the body, studies have uncovered that "hidden" fat, or visceral fat, is more detrimental to health. Trusted Source and can cause organs to age. This type of fat surrounds organs and drives chronic disease.

And when it comes to the type of fat we consume, the "cut (all) fat" message from health professionals has been a universal reality. Especially regarding saturated fat, such as butter, full-fat dairy, or red meat, guidelines have traditionally called for a limit of up to 10% of daily calories.

Recent studies have questioned this threshold, suggesting that for people who already have a low risk of heart disease and low cholesterol levels, consuming saturated fat may not have as big an impact as previously thought. But the replacement for one fat source is just as important as the fat itself.

Medical News Today spoke to three experts — Michelle Routhenstein, MS, RD, CDCES, CDN, preventive cardiology dietitian at EntirelyNourished, Kristin Kirkpatrick, MS, RDN, and Hector Perez, MD, bariatric surgeon at Renew Bariatrics and advisor at Bestsurgeons, to learn more about which fat sources are the most healthy, how much fat people should consume, and whether looking "skinny" translates to being healthy.

Is low-fat advice officially outdated? All three experts agreed that pushing for low fat foods and limiting fat consumption excessively was outdated advice.

"The push to eat as little fat as possible is outdated. Research has updated guidelines to focus more on overall eating patterns and the type of fat consumed rather than minimizing total fat at all costs," said Routhenstein. "Low-fat advice is both obsolete and naive, in my opinion. So-called 'fat-free' foods are often laden with sugar to compensate," Perez chimed in.

Quality over quantity "Basically, we spent 40 years stripping fat out of food and replacing it with refined starch and sugar, then acted surprised when obesity rates tripled, and type 2 diabetes skyrocketed. What makes 'low-fat' even more outdated is modern evidence, which shows that the type of fat matters far more than total fat intake. Healthy fats improve lipids, reduce inflammation, and stabilize appetite," Perez explained. "The quality of the diet should really take

center stage when we consider which dietary pattern is best. In fact, a recent study published in the Journal of the American College of Cardiology comparing low-fat and low-carb diets found that diet quality mattered more than the specific macronutrient ratio," said Kirkpatrick.

However, Kirkpatrick underscored that people with health conditions such as type 2 diabetes, fatty liver, or insulin resistance may benefit more from a moderate- to lower-carbohydrate approach, which could help improve blood sugar control.

What should I eat instead of saturated fat? Current research supports swapping saturated fats for polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats, which can help decrease the levels of LDL or 'bad' cholesterol.

Underscoring that monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats are beneficial for brain and heart health, Kirkpatrick gave examples of healthier alternatives for people looking to reduce their saturated fat intake.

"These healthier fats are found in foods like extra-virgin olive oil, avocados, nuts, seeds, and fatty fish such as salmon," she said. Meanwhile, Routhenstein reminded that eliminating saturated fat completely from one's diet may not be feasible for most people. "I would assess where saturated fat is coming from in your diet and intentionally swap it for an unsaturated fat source instead; swapping is more beneficial than eliminating the saturated fat altogether," she said.

Perez pointed out that making the right switches in one's diet was important and that people should try to avoid replacements that are heavily processed.

"If you reduce saturated fat, replace it with monounsaturated and omega-3 fats like olive oil, nuts, fatty fish, instead of refined carbohydrates. Swapping steak for sugary cereal is not a win," he said. Routhenstein also encouraged people to seek whole foods rather than focusing solely on fat content.

"For example, full-fat dairy (containing saturated fat) also provides protein and calcium, which can support satiety as well as bone and muscle health," she said.

"Rather than obsessing over fat, I think it's high time people educate themselves about nutrients that are actually good vs. bad for their bodies. I've seen people cut saturated fat and replace it with bagels and low fat snack bars, which just seems to me like changing the villain," Perez added.

Can you have fat-related health issues regardless of BMI?

"Of course, and that's why I ask my patients not to rely on just their BMI as a health indicator. I've seen 120-pound patients with fatty liver, insulin resistance, elevated triglycerides, and metabolic syndrome," Perez said.

He also explained the difference between looking "thin" and having healthy body fat.

points in the same direction. They emphasise policy packages that make rural work viable (training pathways, supportive supervision, infrastructure, and career progression) because coercive instruments alone tend to deliver short-term staffing with high turnover once the obligation ends.

The Benefits of quitting smoking: A new lease on Life



By: Dr Vinod Chandrashekhar Dixit

National No Smoking Day (12th March) is an ideal time to start your journey towards a healthier, smoke-free life. Everyone is aware that "Smoking" has been criticized as the most lethal weapon of self-destruction. According to the Tobacco Products Act, 2004, direct and indirect advertising of all tobacco products and their sale to minors is banned. Addiction to nicotine makes it hard to quit. The increasing incidence of heart attacks in India, fast spreading among the younger generation, has been largely on account of smoking habits. "No Smoking Day" is a powerful reminder that quitting smoking is one of the best decisions you can make for your health.

The problem of smoking in India is widespread, but no studies have been done to estimate what percentage of the population are smokers. Roadside paan shops, bountifully stocked with cigarettes, feed smokers continuing to exhale smoke from cigarettes. It is a fact that smoking is a hard habit to break because tobacco contains nicotine, which is highly addictive.

Smoking harms not just the smoker but also family members, coworkers, and others who breathe the smoker's cigarette smoke, called secondhand smoke or passive smoke. In fact, statistics tell us that approximately 70 out of 100 people who smoke want to stop but continue puffing, day in and day out, seemingly powerless to quit. Research has shown that non-smokers who reside with a smoker have a 24% increase in risk for developing lung cancer when compared with other non-smokers.

Owners of sales outlets must display boards with warnings like "tobacco causes cancer", "tobacco kills", and "sale to minors is a punishable offence".

Sometimes it happens that notification prohibiting the sale of tobacco products to minors has no effect as teenagers continue to buy tobacco/cigarettes on the pretext that they are buying it on behalf of their elders.

The youth are the most vulnerable group as far as the consumption of tobacco is concerned. Most of them begin smoking as a fad and even as a rite of passage. According to The Cigarette Package Health Warnings: International Status Report 2014, India has slipped to 136th position in the list of 198 countries that warn smokers about the hazards of smoking through graphic pictures on cigarette packages.

Graphic health warnings using a mixture of pictures and words are part and parcel of every country's policy on cigarette marketing. However, cigarette manufacturers share the kitty with vested interests, hence their interest is well protected with simple modifications to fool the general public.

The government has come out with good points to deal with the matter, but at the same time, taxes on tobacco products should go up to help smokers give up. Such methods will be long-lasting. Moreover, there is a need for awareness campaigns to educate people about the dangers of smoking and the benefits of quitting.

It's high time people wake up to the danger of smoke to themselves and passive smokers before it's too late. Quitting smoking can be challenging, but it's not impossible. With the right support and resources, smokers can overcome their addiction and lead a healthier life.

Let's join hands to create a smoke-free India and promote a healthier lifestyle for all. Let us take a step towards a healthier, smoke-free life - ditch the cigarettes and embrace freedom from nicotine.

Condensed voting period but delayed counting in 5 state assemblies this time

NEW DELHI, March 15: The election schedule for five assemblies announced on Sunday has thrown out quite a few surprises -- fewer phases, a condensed 20-day voting period, but longer gaps between the three polling days and a delayed counting.

The previous round of elections for these five assemblies in 2021 had as many as eight voting days spread across almost a month, while votes were counted on the third day after the last polling date.

This time, votes would be counted on the fifth day after the last day of voting.

The gap is longer between the first two days of voting -- first on April 9 and the second on April 23 -- while the last polling day will be on April 29.

The last assembly election, in Bihar in November 2025, also saw two polling days -- November 6 and 11 -- spread across five days, while votes were counted three days later, on November 14.

Some opposition leaders have al-



leged that the BJP wanted a delayed election in politically crucial West Bengal due to public anger over the LPG crisis, while others see it as the saffron party getting more time to campaign there.

The 2024 Lok Sabha elections had seven polling days spread across nearly 40 days, while counting had taken place on the third day after the last round of polling. Elec-

tions for four assemblies also took place alongside the Lok Sabha polls, which required greater manpower and security arrangements.

The 2024 Lok Sabha election was held in seven phases -- April 19, April 26, May 7, 13, 20, 25 and June 1. The counting of votes took place on June 4.

The last round of assembly polls in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Ker-

ala, Assam and the Union Territory of Puducherry were held in nearly a month's period, with West Bengal having eight phases -- March 27, April 1, 6, 10, 17, 22, 26 and 29.

Responding to a question on compressed phases this time, Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar told a press conference here on Sunday that there was a feeling to reduce phases and make things "comfortable".

While Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry had single-phase polls in 2021, Assam had three phases on March 27, April 1 and April 6. The counting of votes then took place on May 2 after the last phase of voting on April 29 in West Bengal.

When contacted, EC officials gave no specific answer to the queries, but said phases have been compressed for the benefit of the voters.

Usually, a gap is kept between the last polling day and counting to hold re-polls, if required, in some polling stations, so that all votes are counted together. (PTI)

Strategic setback to India's Central Asian diplomacy: Cong slams govt on Chabahar port

NEW DELHI, March 15: The Congress on Sunday said the Chabahar port now not being "on the horizon" for India is the second "strategic setback" to the country's Central Asian diplomacy after the closure of its air force base in Ayni in Tajikistan.

Hitting out at Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh alleged that continuity in governance is an essential reality that is never acknowledged by the "self-obsessed" PM.

Beginning in the late 1990s, India began to explore possibilities of making investments in Iran's Chabahar port as part of an India-Afghanistan-Iran cooperation strategy, Ramesh said on X.

"Finally, after attending the 16th Non Aligned Summit in Tehran, Dr Manmohan Singh gave a fresh impetus to these plans and in May 2013, the Union Cabinet approved an investment of USD 115 million to begin with in Chabahar. It bears recalling that this decision was taken even as India was taking major steps to implement the India-US nuclear agreement that



had been signed in October 2008," he said.

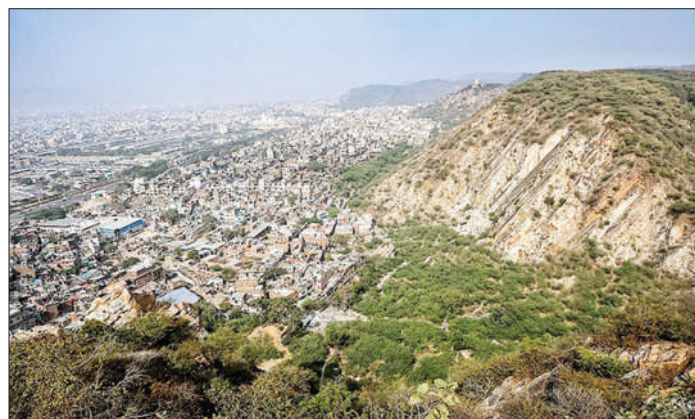
Subsequently, in October 2014, the Modi government, like it is always prone to do, repackaged Dr Singh's Chabahar initiative and passed it off as part of Prime Minister Modi's vision, he said.

"There was no allocation for Chabahar in the 2026/27 Budget. Does this mean that India has exited or that its investment commitments for the time being have been fulfilled?" the Congress leader

said. "In any case, Chabahar, which is about 170 kms west of Pakistan's Gwadar port built by China, is now not on the horizon. This is a second strategic setback to India's Central Asian diplomacy, coming as it does after India's closure of its air force base in Ayni near Dushanbe in Tajikistan," Ramesh said.

In a departure from the past, India has not allocated any funds for the Chabahar port project in its Union Budget. (PTI)

Environment ministry endorses names of 10-member expert committee set up to define Aravalli hills



NEW DELHI, March 15: The Union Environment Ministry has told the Supreme Court that it has no objection with the Central Empowered Committee's proposed 10-member high-powered expert committee which has been tasked to come up with a uniform definition for the Aravalli hills and ranges.

In an affidavit filed before the top court, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has endorsed the names suggested for the high-powered expert committee comprising in-service and retired bureaucrats associated with the Forest Survey of India (FSI), Geological Survey of India (GSI) and Survey of India, along with academicians.

"The MoEFCC respectfully submits that it has no objection if this court as the aforesaid suggested names for the constitution of the proposed High Powered Committee. It is further submitted that the Ministry does not have any additional names to propose at this stage for inclusion in the said committee," the affidavit said. The committee is proposed to be headed by Kanchan Devi, the current director general of the Indian Council of Forestry Research & Education.

The MoEF, in its affidavit, said the aspects relating to the Aravalli Hills and Ranges require a comprehensive and analytical examination, including stakeholder consultation, by a group of domain experts in the relevant fields.

The CEC in its report to the apex court said Devi, a 1991 Indian Forest Service officer from the Madhya Pradesh cadre, has over three decades of experience

in forestry education and research, wildlife and forest policy, and institutional leadership.

The other members include Subhash Ashutosh, former director general of FSI.

Former GSI director Rajendra Kumar Sharma, climate and energy policy expert Tejal Kanitkar, senior academician and life sciences researcher Jaya Parkash Yadav, senior geographer and scholar Tejbir Singh Rana, former additional surveyor general of India SV Singh, former Gujarat principal chief conservator of forests CN Pandey, and former Nagaland PCCF Dharmendra Prakash.

The CEC also recommended names of RN Mishra, a noted author and Vijay Dhasmana, an ecological restoration practitioner and conservationist.

On February 26, the top court had asked the environment ministry and other stakeholders to suggest names of domain experts for the panel which would define the Aravalli hills and ranges, and observed that only lawful mining would be allowed in the region.

The top court, on December 29, took note of the outcry over the new definition of the Aravallis and kept in abeyance its November 20 directions that accepted a uniform definition of these hills and ranges. It had also stalled all mining activities.

It remarked that there was a need to resolve "critical ambiguities", including whether the criteria of 100-metre elevation and the 500-metre gap between hills would strip a significant portion of the range of environmental protection. (PTI)

Panel says bulk of rural ministry budget hike earmarked for VB-GRAMG, flags MGNREGA cut

NEW DELHI, March 15: A parliamentary panel has expressed concern over the budgetary allocation for the Department of Rural Development for the 2026-27 fiscal, noting that while the total outlay has increased by 21 per cent, the bulk of the increase is earmarked for the new VB-GRAMG scheme.

The committee highlighted that funds for most existing programmes remain static, while the allocation for MGNREGA has been sharply reduced.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, in its report tabled in Parliament last week, said the Department of Rural Development (DoRD) has been entrusted with the "huge task" of implementing a large number of schemes aimed at the upliftment of rural masses and therefore it is imperative that flagship programmes are not "left in the lurch" for want of adequate financial support.

The committee noted that ₹ 2,28,768.81 crore has been allocated to the department at the Budget Estimates (BE) stage for 2026-27, which is 21.20 per cent higher than the BE for 2025-26. However, the report pointed out that ₹ 95,692.31 crore of the total has been allocated solely to VB-GRAMG.

"Therefore, barring VB-GRAMG, funds for other major schemes like PMGSY, PMAY-G, DAY-NRLM and NSAP have, by and large, been kept static and moreover, funds

for MGNREGA has been drastically reduced to Rs 30,000 crore," the report stated.

The committee described the current allocation as "inadequate" and "totally unacceptable", arguing that "adequate budgetary allocation" is necessary to maintain the momentum of rural progress.

It noted that popular schemes like MGNREGA, NSAP, DAY-NRLM, PMGSY and PMAY-G are also not immune to inflation and the rising cost of raw materials.

The panel also said such allocation is "inadequate" and "may be suitably enhanced, particularly when the scheme continues to face substantial pending liabilities from previous years".

The committee noted that pending liabilities under MGNREGA are expected to approach nearly Rs 25,000 crore by the end of the financial year, which, it said, would leave very limited fiscal space for meeting fresh demand for work.

"In a demand-driven programme such as MGNREGA, such a situation may severely constrain the ability of the scheme to respond to genuine demand for employment," it said. The panel also observed a gap between allocation and spending in the previous fiscal. Against an allocation of ₹ 1,86,995.61 crore in 2025-26, actual expenditure at the Revised Estimates stage stood at ₹ 99,090.47 crore, a deficit of 47.01 per cent. (PTI)

Pune to get more metro rail routes in May and July, says CM Fadnavis

PUNE, March 15: Pune will get additional metro rail routes in May and July, Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis said on Sunday. He was speaking after inaugurating Metro Bhavan, the headquarters of the MahaMetro Pune Project.

"Maharashtra is the first state to formulate GCC (Global Capability Centres) policy and in such a situation mobility is very important. We are committed to making Pune congestion free by building metro rail lines. We are also planning underground tunnelling for uninterrupted mobility," he said.

Fadnavis admitted that metro rail work in the state's second largest city, also a major industrial and services hub, started late but construction was progressing rapidly now. "In May and July, we will inaugurate more phases of Pune metro rail. We planned a network of 80 kilometres, work on 55 kilometres of which is now nearing completion. The Hinjewadi metro line will start in May. Another 11 km of metro in Pune will be ready by May. There is also a plan to extend the metro line till upcoming Purandar airport," he said. (PTI)

Rahul writes to PM on Bharat Ratna for Kanshi Ram, Mayawati reiterates demand

NEW DELHI, March 15: The clamour for Bharat Ratna for Kanshi Ram grew on the BSP founder's birth anniversary on Sunday, with Congress leader Rahul Gandhi as well as former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Mayawati demanding the country's highest civilian honour for the Dalit icon. While Gandhi wrote a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, appealing to him to confer the Bharat Ratna on Kanshi Ram posthumously, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) chief Mayawati said the government should not repeat the mistake that the Congress had done with B R Ambedkar and bestow the honour on the party founder without any delay.

"Like the Congress party, which did not honour the architect of India's Constitution, Babasaheb Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, with the Bharat Ratna, the current BJP-NDA government at the Centre should not make any further delay in honouring Bahujan leader Kanshi Ramji with the Bharat Ratna," Mayawati was quoted as saying in a statement issued by the BSP.

The former Uttar Pradesh chief minister's remarks came days after Gandhi said had Jawaharlal Nehru been alive, Kanshi Ram would have

been made a chief minister from the Congress. In his letter to Modi, Gandhi said Kanshi Ram transformed the nature of Indian politics and through his movements, raised political awareness among Bahujans and the poor.

"As we commemorate the birth anniversary of Kanshi Ramji today and reflect on his legacy and contributions, I write with a request that he be awarded the Bharat Ratna posthumously," the leader of opposition in the Lok Sabha said. "Kanshi Ramji transformed the nature of Indian politics. Through his movements, he raised political awareness among Bahujans and the poor. He reminded them that their vote, voice and representation are important and that this country belongs to everyone equally," he added. Gandhi asserted that because of Kanshi Ram's efforts, many people who had never considered entering public life began to see politics as a means to achieve justice and equality.

"Our Constitution promises equality, dignity and participation for every Indian. Kanshi Ramji devoted his life to making these promises meaningful for those at the very bottom of society. In doing so, he strengthened the foun-

der of Indian democracy and made our political system more representative and just," the former Congress president said.

"For many years, Dalit intellectuals, leaders and activists have called for Kanshi Ramji to be honoured with the Bharat Ratna. Their demand has been consistent and deeply felt. Recently, I attended a programme in Lucknow where this demand was reiterated strongly by the leaders and participants present, reflecting a widespread sentiment," he said. Confering the Bharat Ratna on Kanshi Ram posthumously would recognise his immense contribution to the country, Gandhi said. "It would honour the aspirations of millions of people who continue to view him as a symbol of empowerment and hope. I hope the government will seriously consider this request," the Congress leader said in his letter to the prime minister.

Sharing his letter on X, Gandhi said, "I demand that the government of India honour the great warrior of social justice and guide of Bahujan consciousness, Honourable Kanshi Ramji, with the Bharat Ratna."

"This highest national honour will be a tribute to Kanshi Ramji and the

democratic institutions in the country," he said.

The Speaker said the time has come to engage in serious contemplation and introspection to maintain the high dignity and prestige of the democratic institutions.

In particular, he said, the top leadership of all political parties and the leaders of all parties in the House must make special efforts to ensure discipline and high ethical conduct and behaviour among their members within the chamber and the Parliament House complex.

"If we all make collective efforts in this direction, the public's faith in parliamentary democracy will certainly be further strengthened, and the prestige and decorum of the House will continually enhance. I am confident that you will all extend your full cooperation in upholding the glorious traditions of this great institution," he said.

Birla said the Parliament is the supreme democratic institution representing the sovereign aspirations of the 140 crore citizens of the country and every voice expressed in the Parliament represents the hopes, aspirations, and expectations of millions of citizens. (PTI)

entire movement that showed croses of Bahujans the path to rights, participation and self-respect. My letter to @PMOIndia regarding this demand," he said, posting the screenshot of the letter. Earlier, the Congress hailed Kanshi Ram on his birth anniversary, with Gandhi saying his tireless struggle and dedication to the rights of the poor, Dalits and the marginalised serve as "an inspiration to us".

Mayawati said Kanshi Ram's "contribution in creating an egalitarian society in the country, as enshrined in the Constitution, is historic, and for this reason, he too resides in the hearts of the people". "He not only created a political force, but also formed a government in a large and important state like Uttar Pradesh, and made me its chief minister," she added.

Mayawati also hit out at the Congress, the Samajwadi Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), saying they only talk about the Bahujans, but rarely work for their uplift. On Saturday, the BSP chief slammed the Congress, saying it was the grand old party's "anti-Dalit ideology" that had necessitated the formation of the outfit and the national party never accorded due respect to Dalit icon Ambedkar. (PTI)

SC directs Centre to submit comprehensive report on encroachments along Ganga

NEW DELHI, March 15: The Supreme Court has directed the Centre to submit a comprehensive report on illegal constructions along the banks and flood plains of Ganga river and inform about the steps taken to remove encroachments.

A bench comprising Justices JB Pardiwala and KV Viswanathan asked the Union government to place on record steps taken so far for implementation and execution of notification on rejuvenation, protection and management of Ganga.

"What are the impediments or hurdles coming in the way of the Authority (National Mission for Clean Ganga Authority) in giving effect to the better and effective implementation of the notification, referred to above?"

"What steps the Authority intends to take to protect the river Ganga passing through all the States, re-



ferred to above, and ensure that the river plains and banks are free of all encroachments" the bench said.

The top court issued notices to

several Ganga basin states and said the issue required a broader examination beyond individual cases.

The matter is listed for next hear-

ing on April 23.

During the hearing, advocate Akash Vashishtha, appearing for the petitioner, submitted there are large-scale encroachments all over the banks which require immediate attention and pointed out that some parts of these riverbanks are very rich in fresh water Dolphins.

The apex court also sought to know from the Centre what type of directions the Authority would like to seek from this Court to give meaningful effect to the notification to make the river plains and the banks of Ganga river absolutely free of all encroachments.

The top court was hearing a plea filed by Patna resident Ashok Kumar Sinha against the June 30, 2020 order of the NGT dismissing his plea against illegal constructions and permanent encroachments on the eco-fragile flood plains. (PTI)

Mamata govt to clear DA arrears

KOLKATA, March 15: West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Sunday announced that her government will clear DA arrears of its employees and pensioners, including teachers, non-teaching staffers, and workers of grant-in-aid institutions, from March this year.

The announcement came within minutes of hiking the honorarium for purohitis and muezzins, ahead of the scheduled announcement of state assembly polls.

"They will start receiving their ROPA 2009 DA arrears from March 2026 onwards as per the modalities detailed out in the notifications issued by our finance department," Banerjee said in a post on X.

The arrears relate to the Revision of Pay and Allowances (ROPA) 2009, a long-standing demand of government employees and pensioners, covering salaries and allowances of teachers, municipal and panchayat staffers, and other grant-in-aid institutions.

A section of state government employees had moved the Supreme Court on the contentious issue, demanding clearance of DA dues. The top court ordered the release of 25 per cent of DA arrears to its employees by March 31, 2026. (PTI)

India-EU ties in focus as Jaishankar starts 2-day visit to Brussels

NEW DELHI, March 15: External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Sunday kick-started a two-day visit to Brussels for talks with his counterparts from member states of 27-nation European Union.

It is the first high-level visit from India to Brussels headquartered EU after the two sides firming up a landmark Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in January.

The external affairs ministry said Jaishankar is travelling to the capital of Belgium at the invitation of EU High Representative and Vice President Kaja Kallas to interact with foreign ministers of the 27 member states of the bloc at its Foreign Affairs Council Meeting.

"During the visit, the external affairs minister will also hold meetings with the leadership of the European Union, and his counterparts from Belgium and other EU member states," the ministry said. "The visit of the external affairs minister coming soon after the historic 16th India-EU summit is expected to further deepen India's strategic partnership with the European Union," it said in a brief statement. (PTI)

Khandu announces ₹ 25-crore package for sericulture, creative economy cell

Arunachal govt committed to strengthening textile sector: CM

ITANAGAR, March 15: Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu on Sunday said his government was committed to strengthening the state's textile sector, underscoring a ₹ 25-crore package for sericulture and a 'creative economy cell' to support artists and designers.

Inaugurating the 'Arunachal Fashion Week - The Artisans' Movement' at Naharlagun near here, Khandu said the state produces nearly 69 metric tonnes of Eri, Muga and Mulberry silk annually, generating employment for over 34,000 people.

He said the state government has proposed five new initiatives in the sericulture sector, including the young silk weaver skill development initiative to encourage the next generation of artisans, according to an official statement.

The chief minister said the pro-



posed Arunachal Creative Economy Cell would provide end-to-end support to artists and creative professionals and help connect them with national and global markets.

He said that women continue to play a central role in the textile sector, with nearly 16,000 self-help groups operating under the Arunachal State Rural Livelihoods Mission (AsRLM), many of which

are engaged in weaving and handicrafts.

The eight-day event, organised by the state's textile and handicrafts department, marks the five-year milestone of the artisans' movement, an initiative aimed at connecting traditional weavers, designers and young creative professionals, while building a structured ecosystem for indigenous textile enterprises, it said.

The inaugural programme featured a textile and tribal fusion installation, showcasing Arunachal Pradesh's diverse weaving traditions alongside contemporary design interpretations.

According to the organisers, the inaugural day saw participation of over 23 designers and more than 50 models, along with weavers and designers from across the region.

The event will conclude on March 21. (PTI)

BJP gives priority to tribal development, says Tripura CM

AGARTALA, March 15: Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha on Sunday said his government has been giving priority to the prosperity and development of the tribal community.

Addressing a BJP programme at Rabindra Bhavan here, he said five of the 12 ministers in the state are from the tribal community, which is rare in Tripura's political history.

"Not only ministers, Ram Pada Jamatia from the tribal community is set to be the speaker of the assembly," he said.

He accused Tipra Motha Party supremo chief Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debbarma of creating confusion among tribals about the script for the Kokborok language.

"It was Pradyot Kishore who had agreed on maintaining the status quo over the script for the Kokborok language just before the commencement of the state school board examination last year. Accordingly, it was carried out, but now he has been insisting on Roman script for the Kokborok language," the CM said.



Saha alleged the Tipra Motha has become an institution of "falseness and allurements". "We won nine out of 13 constituencies that we had contested in the 2021 elections of the tribal council. Later, one member of the council joined the BJP and quit it following allurements (by the Tipra Motha)," he said.

The CM criticised the Tipra Motha-administered tribal council

over alleged corruption.

"The council witnessed corruption over the past five years. Some of its members even made foreign trips, and if they win the assembly elections, they will go to the moon," he quipped.

Promising "real development" in the tribal council area, Saha urged the people to vote for the BJP in the upcoming elections. (PTI)

22,390 voters to vote in Koridang bypoll in Nagaland

HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, March 15: A total of 22,390 electors will cast their franchise in the byelection to the 28 Koridang assembly constituency (ST), reserved for the Scheduled Tribes, in Mokokchung district, scheduled for April 9.

The Election Commission of India announced the schedule for byelection to the constituency on Sunday.

The seat fell vacant following the death of sitting MLA Imkong L. Imchen last year.

The final electoral roll for the constituency was published on March 13, following the special summary revision (SSR) 2026.

Of the 22,390 electors, 22,266 general voters (11,253 males and 11,013 females) and 124 service electors (123 males and one female).

There are a total of 30 notified polling stations in the constituency.

As per the ECI, the gazette notification for the bypoll will be issued on March 16. The last date for filing nominations has been fixed on March 23.

Scrutiny of nominations will take place on March 24, and the last date for withdrawal of candidature is March 26. The counting of votes will take place on May 4.

The commission said EVMs, along with voter verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT), will be used in all polling stations to ensure transparency in the voting process.

Curfew relaxed in Meghalaya's Garo Hills for church services

SHILLONG, March 15: The curfew in Meghalaya's Garo Hills, imposed in the wake of recent violence that claimed two lives was relaxed for 12 hours on Sunday for church services, officials said.

West Garo Hills District Magistrate Vibhor Agarwal, in an order, said the curfew will remain in force for 24 hours from 6 AM on March 15, unless withdrawn earlier but a 12-hour relaxation from 6 AM to 6 PM has been allowed to facilitate public movement to attend church services and other essential activities.

The order, issued under Section 163 of the BNSS, said incidents of violence in various parts of the district posed a serious threat to human life, public safety and property, making it necessary to continue preventive measures.

Authorities said that no person shall move outside their residence during the curfew hours and any violation would attract penal action under Section 223 of the BNS and other provisions.

East Garo Hills District Magistrate R P Marak, in a notification, said the curfew will remain relaxed from

6 AM to 6 PM on March 15 to allow residents to attend church services.

However, authorities said Williamnagar Main Bazaar will remain closed during the relaxation period.

Personnel engaged in essential services such as police, ambulance, electricity and water supply, fire and emergency services and on-duty government officials and media personnel will continue to remain exempted from the curfew restrictions, officials said.

Curfew was imposed following protests over the issue of the eligibility of candidates in the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC) polls.

The protests saw incidents of arson, vandalism and clashes, resulting in the death of at least two persons and injuries to several others, while a number of shops, establishments and vehicles were damaged.

In view of the prevailing law and order situation, Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma announced the postponement of the GHADC elections that were scheduled to be held on April 10. (PTI)

Four arrested for extorting contractual nurses at Manipur hospital

IMPHAL, March 15: Four people have been arrested for extorting contractual nurses of Imphal's Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences (JNIMS), police said on Sunday.

The arrests were made on the basis of a FIR lodged by the victims and Rs 39 lakh and a pistol were seized from their possession.

"Following an investigation into a case registered over the collection of money from contractual nurses of JNIMS, police on Friday arrested four persons involved in the crime from their respective residences in Imphal West district," a police statement said.

The accused persons committed the crime at the behest of the banned militant outfit KCP (Taibangganba) and transferred the collected money to the underground outfit, it added. (PTI)

Mizoram govt likely to extend anti-drug campaign beyond March

AIZAWL, March 15: The Mizoram government is likely to extend its ongoing anti-drug campaign 'Operation Jericho' beyond its March deadline, officials said on Sunday.

The drive was launched jointly by the state police, excise department and the Young Mizo Association (YMA) on September 1, 2025, to curb drug trafficking across the border. Mizoram shares a 510-km long border with Myanmar.

Initially planned for four months till December, the campaign was later extended till March this year, the officials said.

State Home Minister K Sapdanga conducted a security assessment of Mizoram's southern border and visited the India-Myanmar border at Zochachhuah in Lawngtlai district on Saturday, they said.



Sapdanga said the government may extend the ongoing anti-drug campaign beyond March, according to the officials.

The home minister also highlighted the need for a more robust monitoring system.

"Mizoram government requires a dedicated system to meticulously track individuals crossing the bor-

der," he said on Saturday.

Sapdanga also convened a meeting with officials and prominent NGOs in Siaha on Saturday to review the progress of 'Operation Jericho'.

"We have already extended the operation until the end of March, and we are prepared to extend it further as the situation demands," he said.

"By collaborating with local NGOs and deploying police personnel at key transit points, we have successfully disrupted the supply chain, particularly from the eastern borders," the minister asserted.

"This is a battle for the survival of our youth. We require the collective strength of the government machinery and civil society. No one is safe from this menace, and we cannot afford to lower our guard," he added. (PTI)

Liangmai body opposes relocation demand



IMPHAL, March 15: The Liangmai Naga Council Manipur (LNCM), while strongly reacting to the demand of Kuki organisations seeking relocation of Kuki villages from Ukhrul district to Kangpokpi region, said that the demand is irrational and totally unacceptable.

In a statement issued on Sunday, the LNC said, "At a time when the people of Manipur are already facing immense uncertainty and instability due to the prevailing conflict across various regions of the state, the LNC is deeply shocked and disturbed by the recent demands and ultimatum reportedly issued by certain Kuki civil society organisations (CSOs) in Ukhrul to the Government of Manipur."

The Liangmai apex body asserted that the reported demand seeking relocation of Kuki villages from Ukhrul district to Kangpokpi region is irrational and totally unacceptable.

According to the LNC, Kangpokpi is a multi-ethnic region where various communities have historically coexisted. However, the region is already under severe strain due to the presence of a large number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) resulting from the recent ethnic conflict in the state, the LNC added.

The Liangmai body reasoned that any attempt to relocate addi-

tion but would only worsen the crisis—amounting to jumping from the frying pan into the fire," it said.

The LNC further expressed grave concern that the indigenous populations in several parts of the region are increasingly feeling threatened due to the continuous influx of outsiders and the growing pressure created by internally displaced persons (IDPs). It added that turning the Kangpokpi region into a dumping ground would only intensify social tensions and alter the demography of the indigenous inhabitants.

The LNC then said issues arising in a particular locality must be resolved within that locality through lawful administrative mechanisms. Transferring or exporting problems from one region to another will only spread instability and conflict across wider areas of the state, it added.

The Liangmai Naga Council reiterated its firm and unwavering stand in safeguarding the rights, land and security of the indigenous people of the region. The LNC added that it remains committed to protecting these interests through all lawful and democratic means.

The LNC also said it will stand resolute in defence of the rights and security of its people and will not remain silent in the face of any attempt to destabilize the region or undermine peaceful coexistence among communities.

The Liangmai body said it issued the statement in the interest of justice, peace and the protection of indigenous rights.

Meanwhile, the LNC said it was deeply saddened by the recent unfortunate incident that occurred at Shangkai village under Ukhrul district, leading to the loss of two young lives. The LNC expressed its deepest condolences to the bereaved families and shared their grief during this painful time. (NNN)

Arunachal to digitally disseminate info about schemes in tribal languages in remote areas: Min

ITANAGAR, March 15: Arunachal Pradesh Rural Development and Panchayati Raj Minister Ojing Tasing said the state government is working on a digital governance system with a local language interface to help people in rural areas better understand schemes and also to strengthen grassroots administration.

The minister said the government plans to introduce digital screens in villages and train panchayat leaders to operate them, besides launching a comprehensive online system to monitor administrative functioning at the grassroots level.

"We are trying to develop a system through which villagers can easily understand government schemes. Arunachal Pradesh has 26 major tribes and when you go to the villages, many people do not understand English or Hindi properly. We are exploring ways to convert information into a format that people can understand," Tasing told PTI in an interview.

He said the proposal, which has been discussed with Chief Minister Pema Khandu, may initially be implemented as a pilot project covering two or three tribes before expanding it across the state.

According to the minister, since many tribal languages in the state do not have a standard script, the proposed system may use the Roman script to represent local languages so that information about schemes can be disseminated more effectively.



"If the chief minister approves it, we plan to install screens in villages, like television displays, through which information about schemes and governance can be shared. Panchayat leaders will be trained to operate the system," he said.

Tasing said the state government is working on strengthening transparency and accountability through digital monitoring. Under the proposed system, detailed information about government staffers, including transfers and contractual postings at the district level will be made available online along with their photographs.

"If you open the website, you will be able to see details of postings, transfers and other information. The system is already ready and will be launched soon," he said, adding that it would help authorities monitor the implementa-

tion of schemes more effectively.

The minister said the initiative is part of the broader push towards strengthening devolution of power to panchayats, though several structural challenges still remain.

He said financial and administrative powers have been devolved to local bodies, but effective implementation sometimes becomes difficult due to procedural gaps and local practices.

"The Centre has made everything systematic. If you work, you get funds, if you don't, you won't get funds," he said.

Tasing also pointed out that implementation of online auditing mechanisms has been a challenge in remote villages due to poor connectivity and lack of road access.

"Some villages still do not have internet connectivity. Without roads, telecommunications infrastructure cannot reach remote

areas easily," he said.

Citing the example of his own constituency, he said some villages were earlier cut off but connectivity projects sanctioned under schemes such as the Rural Infrastructure Development Fund (RIDF) and other initiatives are helping improve access.

The minister further said the government had attempted to make it mandatory for panchayat representatives to have a minimum educational qualification, but the proposal did not receive adequate support.

"Nowadays, panchayat leaders need to read guidelines and understand government schemes. Education helps them explain things to the people," he said.

He acknowledged that limitations in awareness and capacity among local representatives have sometimes affected the functioning of panchayats.

Tasing said the government is focusing on educating villagers about the benefits of various schemes so that communities can participate more actively in development programmes.

"Many people only associate schemes with money. They do not fully understand how these initiatives can improve livelihoods, create opportunities and make villages safer," he said.

Despite limited manpower, the department is making efforts to strengthen grassroots governance and improve awareness among villagers, the minister added. (PTI)

Arunachal minister urges consumers to stay vigilant

ITANAGAR, March 15: Arunachal Pradesh Consumer Affairs Minister Gabriel D Wangsu on Sunday emphasised the need to strengthen consumer awareness and protection across the state.

Speaking at a consumer awareness workshop on the occasion of World Consumer Rights Day, Wangsu said both the Centre and the state government have been making continuous efforts to strengthen the consumer protection framework.

"In Arunachal Pradesh, the institutional mechanisms for grievance redressal are already in place with the functioning of the state consumer commission and district consumer commissions to deal with cases related to unfair trade practices, defective goods and deficient services," he said.

Wangsu said the state government has directed all departments to prepare citizen charters outlining the services they provide, along with defined timelines for delivery.

He urged people to remain alert while purchasing goods and services by carefully checking labels, expiry dates and certification marks to ensure quality and safety.

He appealed to people to make informed financial and purchasing decisions, noting that consumer protection transcends social and economic boundaries and applies equally to everyone from daily wage earners buying essential commodities to professionals investing in financial products.

He said that with stronger institutions, greater public awareness and active community participation, Arunachal Pradesh can build a marketplace that is safe, fair and transparent for all consumers. (PTI)

Sayali Satghare: Recent success has 10 years of hard work behind it

MUMBAI, March 15: Sayali Satghare credits her success at the highest level to over 10 years of toil, as she looks to make it big on the international stage for India and in T20 leagues.

Sayali's career is on a sharp upward trajectory. After playing a key role in Royal Challengers Bengaluru's WPL title-winning run earlier this year, the Mumbai player made her Test debut earlier this month.

"I believe that you should keep working hard and whenever you get an opportunity, you should grab it," Sayali told PTI in an exclusive interaction on the sidelines of the announcement of the inaugural women's T20 Mumbai League as well as the fourth edition of the men's event.

"Until you don't get it, you should keep working hard and wait for it. And when you do get it,

you should give your 100 per cent."

"The performances in the last 2-3 months are not just about those months, but they have 10 years of hard work behind them," Sayali said.

Sayali took nine wickets for RCB as the franchise claimed their second title win earlier this year. "It was a good experience. It was my first time with RCB and we won the trophy. I'm glad that I was able to contribute," Sayali said.

"I would say that the RCB culture was very good. We were like a family. Everyone was there for each other through ups and downs. Whether it was a good or a bad day, everyone was together as a team."

"Everyone was supporting each other and enjoying each other's success and there was a different match winner in each match. It was a very



good experience and it will help me a lot in the future," Sayali added.

Buoyed by her white-ball experience, Sayali gave a fine example of herself when the opportunity came calling to play Test cricket for India against Australia in a day-night Test at the historic WACA Ground in Perth.

Even as India, playing with the pink ball under lights in the opponent's territory were hammered by 10 wickets, Sayali returned with some happy memories after claiming four wickets in her maiden outing.

"Honestly, I didn't expect that I would get so many wickets. I just wanted to get that opportunity and I was hoping to play the match and contribute to the team in whatever way I can," Sayali expressed. "I feel playing with a pink ball for the first time, the preparation I did was very good. I knew which lengths I could hit on that wicket.

Lengths are different in Australia and India so we had prepared a lot for it and in the match, the focus was to do what we had prepared and planned."

Sayali, meanwhile, said the competitiveness in Mumbai's cricket would be seen in the first-ever edition of the women's T20 Mumbai league.

"It's a huge opportunity for all the girls. It's a huge platform to show their skills and perform on a big stage. This experience will help them a lot. It's a very good initiative of MCA to start the women's T20 league," she said.

"There's competition everywhere in Mumbai, this league will also be very competitive. Mumbai is a big city and there's a lot of hidden talent which people don't know about. The upcoming cricketers will get that opportunity to showcase their talent." (PTI)

Formula 1 calls off April races in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia due to Iran war

SHANGHAI, March 15: Formula 1 and its governing body FIA said the Grand Prix races in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia will not happen in April because of safety concerns related to the Iran war.

Both countries have been struck during Iran's response after the United States and Israel launched a wave of attacks on Iran.

The announcement was made early Sunday morning in Shanghai ahead of the Chinese Grand Prix.

"Due to the ongoing situation in the Middle East region, the Bahrain and Saudi Arabian Grands Prix will not take place in April," F1 said. "While several alternatives were considered, it was ultimately decided that no substitutions will be made in April."

F1 was due to race in Bahrain on April 12 and in the Saudi Arabian city of Jeddah on April 19.

"While this was a difficult decision to take, it is unfortunately the right one at this stage considering the current situation in the Middle East," said Stefano Domenicali, president and CEO of F1.

The FIA said the two races "will not take place in April" and that no replacements would be organized.

"The FIA will always place the safety and well being of our community and colleagues first. After careful consideration, we have taken this decision with that responsibility firmly in mind," FIA President Mohammed Ben Sulayem said.

The FIA didn't explicitly rule out rescheduling the races and, along with F1, did not use the words "cancel" or "postpone" in announcing the series would not be in Bahrain or Saudi Arabia next month.

Ben Sulayem said: "Bahrain and Saudi



Arabia are incredibly important to the ecosystem of our racing season, and I look forward to returning to both as soon as circumstances allow."

The promoters of the races in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia said they supported the decision.

F1's packed schedule doesn't have any obvious open dates for rescheduled races this year.

Calling off the Bahrain and Saudi Arabian races means there will be a five-week gap from the Japanese Grand Prix on March 29 and the next race, the Miami Grand Prix on

May 3. Without any rescheduling, the 22-race schedule would be the shortest since 2023.

The two Middle East races weren't until next month but F1 faced making a decision earlier because it typically flies in the first staff and cargo to tracks weeks in advance.

F1 was also faced with the difficulty of selling tickets at short notice, which make it almost impossible to set up a replacement race in other countries.

Kimi Antonelli, the Mercedes driver who qualified on pole position for Sunday's race

in Shanghai, said his thoughts were "with the ones that are suffering from this situation" and that safety needed to be the priority, adding of the FIA and F1: "I'm sure they will do the right thing."

The schedule is a joint matter for the FIA and for F1's commercial rights holder and teams had signaled a willingness to follow their lead.

"I think we follow the guidance of the FIA and Formula 1, as we always do. They've always led us in the right direction," Audi team principal Jonathan Wheatley said Friday. "Nobody's going to compromise on anything that would put teams into an uncomfortable situation."

Bahrain had already hosted two preseason F1 tests this season before Israel and the United States launched attacks on Iran. A smaller-scale test of wet-weather tires was called off in the immediate aftermath of those strikes.

A travel shutdown affecting major airports in the Middle East also caused disruption for Europe-based F1 and team staff heading to Melbourne for the season-opening Australian Grand Prix.

The last time a scheduled F1 race was canceled was in 2023, when the Emilia Romagna Grand Prix in northern Italy was called off at short notice due to deadly floods in the area.

In 2022, F1 continued with its race weekend in Saudi Arabia even after Yemen's Houthi rebels attacked an oil depot during a practice session, with black smoke visible from the Jeddah circuit.

The same year, F1 canceled the Russian Grand Prix's contract after Russia invaded neighboring Ukraine. (AP)

Theegala back in top 10, Aberg extends lead at Players Championship

FLORIDA, March 15: Indian American Sahith Theegala carded a solid four-under 68 to move back into the top 10 with one round left to play at the USD 25million Players Championship.

Theegala had six birdies against two bogeys in his 68 that took his total score to seven-under par. He is six shots behind Sweden's Ludvig Aberg, who extended his lead to three shots after carding one-under 71. His total score is now 13-under par.

Theegala is currently placed T-10 on the leaderboard alongside four other players, Robert MacIntyre, Austin Smotherman, Jacob Bridgeman and Sepp Straka.

Another Indian American Akshay Bhatia carded two-under 70 to gain two positions and be placed at T-26 alongside world number one Scottie Scheffler, who carded four-under 68 to have a total score of four-under par.

Indo-Canadian Sudarshan Yellamaraju carded a strong round six-under 66 to move into the top 20. Yellamaraju is now T-19 with a score of five-under par.

Rory McIlroy continues to have a forgettable week as he is placed T-57 after carding an even par third round as his total score stands at one-over par.

Theegala started his third round with a birdie on the first hole before dropping the stroke on the seventh and turned in even par. On the back nine the 28-year-old set himself up for a strong round with consecutive birdies on the 11th and 12th holes before making his final bogey of the round on the 14th. He went on to birdie the 15th, 17th and 18th holes.

If Theegala finished within the top 10 this week he could move into the top 15 of the FedExCup rankings.

Michael Thorbjorsen moved into second position after carding five-under 67. Thorbjorsen's total is now 10-under par.

In third place is Cameron Young with a total score of nine-under par and there is a six-way tie for fourth place between Matt Fitzpatrick, Brian Harman, Viktor Hovland, Justin Thomas, Corey Connors and Xander Schauffele who are all at 8-under par after three rounds. (PTI)

Kimi Antonelli takes his first F1 win with victory in China to extend Mercedes' dominant start

SHANGHAI, March 15: He's been defined by being Lewis Hamilton's successor and George Russell's teammate. Now Kimi Antonelli is a Formula 1 race-winner in his own right, and the second-youngest in history.

The 19-year-old Italian pulled clear of an entertaining battle between Russell and the two Ferraris to take a commanding win at the Chinese Grand Prix on Sunday and share the podium with his teammate and Hamilton, the seven-time champion he replaced last year.

It's a vindication of the gamble Mercedes team principal Toto Wolff took in picking the youngster, who'd joined Mercedes' junior program aged just 11, to replace an all-time great when Hamilton moved to Ferrari for 2025. There were plenty of doubters when Antonelli crashed 10 minutes into his practice debut in 2024.

"Many said it was just too early last year, and obviously we asked ourselves that question, whether it was too much to throw him into this pressure cooker," Wolff told Sky Sport Germany.

"One year with ups and downs and he's

young. We have to forgive him these mistakes, and now he's in the second Grand Prix (of 2026) and brings it home ruthlessly. It's good."

The 19-year-old Italian was the youngest pole-position starter and briefly lost the lead to Hamilton at the start but retook it soon after and was in control the rest of the way.

"We did it! We did it!" Antonelli shouted to his team over the radio amid tears and whoops, and he was holding back laughs amid celebrations and a TV interview soon after.

It was another 1-2 finish for Mercedes to start the season as Russell came through a battle with both Ferraris to finish second. Hamilton was third for his long-awaited first Grand Prix podium finish for Ferrari.

The only driver younger than Antonelli to win a Grand Prix was Max Verstappen, who was 18 when he took his first victory in 2016. He's the first Italian to win since Giancarlo Fisichella in 2006.

<h2>Russell</h2> bests Ferraris in thriller</h2>The new regulations again produced a dramatic fight for position between Mercedes and the fast-starting Ferraris as Rus-

sell fought his way past Charles Leclerc and Hamilton in a multi-lap battle with numerous changes of position. That allowed Antonelli to build his lead at the front.

Even after Russell had pulled away to secure second place, teammates Leclerc and Hamilton kept up their own fight for third. "This is quite a fun battle," Leclerc exclaimed over the radio.

Leclerc was fourth with Oliver Bearman fifth for Haas, Pierre Gasly sixth for Alpine and Liam Lawson seventh for Racing Bulls. Isack Hadjar recovered from an early spin to place eighth for Red Bull, ahead of Carlos Sainz, Jr. in ninth for Williams, while Franco Colapinto was 10th for Alpine to score his first point since 2024.

Max Verstappen was running sixth when his car lost power and he had to limp back to the pits in another blow for the four-time champion, who has been a leading critic of F1's new cars.

Double disaster for McLaren Formula 1 champion Lando Norris and his McLaren teammate Oscar Piastri were both unable to start after encountering technical problems minutes before the race began. (AP)

'I was trying to land it 133 and I fatted it just a little bit and it went to a foot'

Ludvig Aberg builds a 3-shot lead in The Players Championship

PONTE VEDRA BEACH (US), March 15: The biggest challenge for Ludvig Aberg was finding satisfaction in a three-shot lead at The Players Championship instead of wondering how much larger it could have been.

Aberg had only two bogeys on his card all week and was four shots ahead of Michael Thorbjorsen when he stood in the fairway on the par-5 16th hole, 193 yards away with a 7-iron in his hand. He had an 8-foot birdie putt on the island-green 17th hole. He smashed his drive on the daunting 18th that set up a 25-foot birdie attempt.

Par. Par. Bogey.

Aberg still managed a 1-under 71 thanks largely to his third eagle of the week with an 18-foot putt on the par-5 11th. He was three shots clear of Michael Thorbjorsen, a rival in college and now a neighbor in the Ponte Vedra Beach area.

"Definitely would have loved to come out of 16 and 17 with at least one birdie, and then obviously the three-putt on 18 kind of stings, annoys me a little bit," Aberg said. "But overall, I started the day with

a two-shot lead and ended with a three, so that's a positive."

If nothing else it was reminder nothing comes easily on the TPC Sawgrass even when it looks that way, and the final 18 holes isn't always a sprint to the finish.

"It's all about executing," Aberg said. "You're going to get punished if you don't, which is a fun way to play golf." Aberg smiled and mouthed the word, "Fun."

Aberg was at 13-under 203 and will be in the final group with Thorbjorsen, who also took up shop at the TPC Sawgrass when he got out of college. They are friends who play often, just as they did as two of the most elite college players. Both were No. 1 in the PGA Tour University ranking in consecutive years to earn PGA Tour cards.

Thorbjorsen made up ground with a 67 to land in the final group as he tries to become only the third player — and first since Craig Perks in 2002 — to win The Players in his first try.

"I don't think I have to change too much, especially on courses like this," Thorbjorsen said. "I



think if you play some really steady golf you'll run into some birdies. Does anyone have a bogey-free round either yesterday or today? I'm not too sure, but there aren't many. So I think slow and steady wins the race, and we're just going to play some solid golf."

Cameron Young was Aberg's biggest threat on the back nine, holing a 45-foot birdie putt on the par-3 13th and getting away with a wedge he hit a little heavy on the



LONDON, March 15: Arsenal strengthened its grip on the Premier League title race on the day its 16-year-old wonderkid, Max Dowman, scored a brilliant solo goal to become the competition's youngest ever scorer.

After Arsenal relied on late goals by Viktor Gyokeres and Dowman to snatch a 2-0 home win over Everton, second-place Manchester City could only draw 1-1 at West Ham a few hours later Saturday. The lead grew to nine points on what might prove to be a defining day in Arsenal's bid for a first English league title since 2004.

It will certainly never be forgotten by Dowman, the school kid and surely a future superstar in English soccer.

At 16 years, 73 days, he changed the game after coming on in the second half for his third Premier League appearance in a breakthrough season that has already seen him become the youngest player in Champions League history.

It was his cross from the right that was missed by Everton goalkeeper Jordan Pickford and struck the midriff of Arsenal substitute Piero Hincapie. The ball bounced across the goalmouth and Gyokeres applied the finishing touch from close range.

Then, in the seventh minute of stoppage time, Dowman collected the ball midway in his own half after a corner was cleared, dribbled around two players, and raced clear to tap into an empty net. Everton goalkeeper Jordan Pickford was stranded upfield having gone up for the corner in search of an equalizer.

City couldn't match Arsenal, surrendering the lead given to Pep

Guardiola's team by Bernardo Silva in the 31st minute. Four minutes later, Konstantinos Mavropanos headed home the equalizer at a corner.

It wraps up a tough week for City, which was beaten 3-0 by Real Madrid in the first leg of the Champions League's round of 16 on Wednesday.

Across London, Chelsea lost 1-0 to Newcastle thanks to an 18th-minute goal by Anthony Gordon.

Chelsea stayed in fifth place but could be overtaken by Liverpool, which hosts struggling Tottenham on Sunday.

Burnley draws and facing relegation

Burnley is running out of time and hope in the Premier League.

A 0-0 home draw with Bournemouth on Saturday left next-to-last Burnley — one of the many U.S.-owned teams in England's top division — eight points from safety with just eight games remaining this season and facing an immediate return to the Championship.

Burnley has won just four of its 30 league games.

Bizarre winner for Brighton
Sunderland, another promoted team, appears to be safe from relegation but is limping toward the end of the season after a third straight home loss — this time to Brighton 1-0.

The only goal was a bizarre one, with Yankuba Minteh's mis-hit cross from the byline somehow squeezing in at the near post in the 58th minute at the Stadium of Light.

Sunderland hadn't lost at home until a defeat to Liverpool on Feb. 11. Since then, it has lost to Fulham and now Brighton. (AP)

he holed an 8-foot putt for double bogey and escaped with a 72 to leave him four shots behind.

"I cost myself two off the tee and I saved myself one with the putter," he said of the 8-footer he made. "So it could have been worse. I drew a terrible lie right of the green, somewhere that it feels like you should have a decent chance to get up-and-down. Saved myself one with the putter is what I'm going to take away from it."

Big blunders cost so many others.

Justin Thomas, looking strong in his second tournament back from lower back surgery in November, went from the water to the rough and then over the green in making a triple bogey on the sixth hole. His tee shot on the reachable par-4 12th found the water. But he kept it together, had a pair of birdies later and salvaged a 72.

Thomas was at 8-under 208, five shots behind along with Matt Fitzpatrick (69), Brian Harman (69), Viktor Hovland (69), Corey Connors (72) and Xander Schauffele (74).

Schauffele was in the final group

and managed only one birdie while hitting just eight greens. Fitzpatrick made double bogey on the 18th with a three-putt from 35 feet.

Young is at The Players for the fourth time and has never cracked the top 50, and yet his optimism was running high even after a double bogey to finish. That he felt he was still in the game said more about the give-and-take nature of the TPC Sawgrass than Aberg.

Aberg shot a 63 in the second round to take the lead. Thomas shot a 62 last year. Harman shot 64 on Friday and the best score Saturday was a 65 by Robert MacIntyre.

"Those number are out there, and no reason why I can't be the one to shoot them," Young said.

And so the final group is a pair of locals — one from Sweden by way of Texas Tech, the other from just outside Boston by way of Stanford. Neither plays the Stadium Course all that much because it's rarely in the condition seen at The Players.

But they like the Stadium Course and know their way around, just not with so much at stake. (AP)