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- Japan's Takaichi tries to reaffirm alliance with Trump as he seeks help securing Strait of Hormuz

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- 'Duare Chikitsa' camps, ₹500 hike in Lakshmir Bhandar
- Mamata making 'desperate' claims ahead of elections, says Bengal BJP chief



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*Himanta files nomination from Jalukbari constituency*

# Modi expected to attend 3 poll rallies

**GUWAHATI, March 20:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma filed nomination papers on Friday, seeking re-election from the Jalukbari constituency for the sixth term in a row.

Sarma was accompanied by his wife Riniki Bhuyan Sarma, son Nandil Biswa Sarma, BJP's Gauhati Lok Sabha MP Bijuli Kalita Medhi and Guwahati Mayor Mrigen Sarania.

Before reaching the Kamrup (Metropolitan) District Election office to file the nomination, the CM, atop an open vehicle, led a large procession from the Veterinary Field at Khanapara to the election office at Hengrabari, a distance of about 5.6 kms.

The BJP leader got off the vehicle at Last Gate in Dispur, walked for a few minutes, and then entered another vehicle to reach the office of the district commissioner cum district electoral officer.

He was greeted along the way by traditional 'gayan-bayan' (a group of traditional devotional performers), Bihu dancers and drummers.

Thousands of people from his constituency, the majority of whom were women, braved incessant rains since last night to accompany Sarma in the procession.

Sarma's wife was seen taking a selfie *(CONTD. ON PAGE-2)*

## 116 candidates file poll papers till date

**GUWAHATI, March 20:** A total of 116 candidates, including Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, have filed their nomination papers till Friday for elections to 126 Assam assembly constituencies, officials said.

Altogether 109 candidates filed their nominations on Friday while seven had filed the previous day.

Besides the chief minister, the other prominent candidates to have filed their nominations include Speaker Biswajit Daimary from Tamulpur, Leader of Opposition Debabrata Saikia from Nazira, Rajor Dal president Akhil Gogoi from Sivasagar and Assam Jatiya Parishad President Lurinjyoti Gogoi.

Cabinet ministers Ajanta Neog from Golaghat, Ranjeet Kumar Das from Bhowanipur-Sorbhog, Prashanta *(CONTD. ON PAGE-2)*

# Tuliram confident of victory from Rongkhang

*BJP flexes strength as candidates file nominations in WKA*

**HT Bureau**

**DIPHU/HAMREN, March 20:** The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Friday put up a strong show of organisational strength in West Karbi Anglong as its candidates filed nomination papers for the 2026 Assam Legislative Assembly elections amid a massive mobilisation of supporters.

BJP candidates Tuliram Ronghang (111-Rongkhang LAC) and Habe Teron (112-Amri LAC) began the day by performing traditional Karbi rituals, seeking ancestral blessings before proceeding to the District Commissioner's office to file their nominations.

A large procession accompanied the candidates, with thousands of party workers carrying flags and raising slogans, bringing parts of Hamren to a standstill.

The show of strength is being seen as an attempt to consolidate support ahead of the polls.

Senior party leaders were present during the filing of nominations, including Diphu Lok Sabha MP Amarsing Tisso and incumbent MLA Darsing Ronghang, who, despite being denied a ticket this time, extended his support to the party's nominees.

Several Executive Members and MACs of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council also joined the

event.

"The overwhelming turnout reflects the public's faith in the BJP's development agenda," Tuliram Ronghang said, expressing confidence of victory.

Meanwhile, candidates from other parties also filed their nominations across the hill districts. APHLC leader Bikram Hanse filed from 112-Amri LAC, while CPI(ML)-L candidate Robi Kumar Phangcho and APHLC's Sarkiri Rongphar filed nominations from 109-Howraghat.

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has also intensified its preparations, with General and Expenditure Observers arriving in districts across Assam to oversee poll-related arrangements. Officials said the observers will monitor *(CONTD. ON PAGE-2)*

## Debabrata Saikia files nomination

**GUWAHATI, March 20:** Leader of Opposition in the Assam Assembly Debabrata Saikia on Friday filed nomination as Congress candidate from Nazira constituency in Sivasagar district.

The Congress is part of a six-party alliance for the April 9 state elections, with Raijor Dal, Assam Jatiya Parishad, CPI(M), CPI(ML)L and All Party Hills Leaders Conference.

Saikia was accompanied by state party president Gaurav Gogoi and other leaders as he submitted his nomination seeking a fourth straight term from Nazira, known as a stronghold of his family.

His father and former chief minister, late Hiteswar Saikia, and mother Hemoprava Saikia had earlier represented Nazira in the assembly. The Congress leader expressed *(CONTD. ON PAGE-2)*

## NDA-constituent Bodoland People's Front names candidates for 11 seats

**KOKRAJHAR, March 20:** NDA constituent Bodoland People's Front (BPF) has announced candidates for 11 seats it will be contesting in the April 9 Assam Assembly elections, which include its lone minister in the current government, besides the wife of the party chief.

One of the three sitting MLAs of the party, Durga Das Boro, was dropped.

BPF president Hagrama Mohilary declared party nominees here late on Thursday night, after the other NDA allies in the state, BJP and Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), announced their candidates earlier during the day.

Cabinet minister Charan Boro, who is a two-time MLA, will be contesting from the Mazbat constituency.

Another sitting MLA and senior party leader Rabiram Narzary will be the candidate from Dotma.

Mohilary's wife, Sewli Mohilary, will be making her political debut, being named as the party candidate from the Kokrajhar seat.

Former MLAs in the fray are Rihon Daimary (Udalguri), Thaneswar Basumatary (Manas), Maneswar Brahma (Baksa) and Maheswar Boro (Bhergaon).

Former president of All Assam Minority Students' Union Rezaul Karim, who had recently joined the BPF, has been named the candidate from Parbotjhora seat.

Other BPF candidates are Sabharam Basumatary (Gossaigaon), Rupam Roy (Baokungri) and Paniram Brahma (Sidli Chirang).

Counting of votes will be undertaken on May 4. In the outgoing Assembly, *(CONTD. ON PAGE-2)*

# Cong, Raijor Dal seal seat-sharing deal

**HT Correspondent**

**JORHAT, March 20:** The uncertainty over a possible alliance between the Congress and Raijor Dal ended on Thursday night, with both parties agreeing on a seat-sharing arrangement after several rounds of discussions over the past few days.

Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) president Gaurav Gogoi, who is also the sitting Jorhat MP, and Raijor Dal president Akhil Gogoi jointly announced the alliance while addressing the media at the former's residence in Nazir Ali late on Thursday night.

As per the agreement, the Raijor Dal will contest 13 seats, including Gauripur and Goalpara East, where it will be engaged in friendly contests with the Congress.

Akhil Gogoi will contest from the Sivasagar constituency.

The seats allocated to the Raijor Dal include several constituencies where negotiations had been contentious, notably Dhing, over which both parties had staked claim, leading to a temporary deadlock in talks.

The Congress also ceded Margherita, where its candidate Prateek Bordoloi withdrew from the race on Thursday.

The development came after his father, Pradyut Bordoloi, joined the BJP earlier in the day.

Explaining the rationale behind the alliance, Akhil Gogoi said the decision was taken in the larger interest of the state and to defeat the BJP-led government under chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

Appealing to voters, he said a government led by Gaurav Gogoi would benefit the state, describing him as a young leader with a national profile.

"People have a historic opportunity to elect Gaurav Gogoi as the state's future chief minister and help build a new Assam where development is inclusive," he said.

He further alleged that there was public dissatisfaction, claiming that the BJP had altered the social fabric of the state.

Gaurav Gogoi thanked Akhil Gogoi and his team, as well as others who worked towards finalising the alliance.

"It is difficult for a party like the Congress to leave seats, but the national leadership agreed in the interest of the state and its future," he said.

He added that the alliance was finalised after assessing ground realities and addressing concerns raised by the party's high command. He also noted that several civil society leaders played a role in bringing the two sides together.

The Raijor Dal is set to contest in constituencies including Mariani, *(CONTD. ON PAGE-2)*

## Lurinjyoti Gogoi files nomination for Assam polls

**DIBRUGARH, March 20:** The president of Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP), Lurinjyoti Gogoi, on Friday filed his nomination for the Khowang constituency in Dibrugarh district.

Gogoi had contested the 2021 assembly elections and the 2024 Lok Sabha polls unsuccessfully, with the AJP yet to make its entry into the assembly or Parliament.

The AJP is part of a six-party alliance for the April 9 assembly elections, which include the Congress, Raijor Dal and CPI(M).

Gogoi also led a procession of the alliance members and leaders through the streets of Dibrugarh town, in an apparent show of unity of the opposition parties.

Talking to reporters after submitting his *(CONTD. ON PAGE-2)*

## Himanta's family says 'very happy' over public support

**GUWAHATI, March 20:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's wife and son, who accompanied him during the filing of his nomination papers from Jalukbari seat on Friday, said they were "very happy" to see a large number of people turn up to support him.

His wife Riniki Bhuyan Sarma described the occasion as a "very happy moment for us".

"The people of Jalukbari consider Himanta as the head of the family, and this huge gathering shows their support and blessings for him," she said.

He also considers the people of his constituency as members of his extended family, she said.

"He belongs to the public and for the last 25 years he has been serving them, which he will continue to do in the future," she added.

"I have been helping in his campaign for *(CONTD. ON PAGE-2)*

# Zubeen death case: Prosecution conclude arguments

**GUWAHATI, March 20:** The prosecution on Friday completed its arguments during charge framing before a local court here in the Zubeen Garg death case, the deceased singer's wife said.

Talking to reporters after attending the hearing, Garima Saikia Garg said, "On the second day of the hearing of charge framing, the prosecution completed its arguments. The defence lawyer of one of the accused, Amrit Praba Mahanta, placed half of his arguments."

Amrit Prabha's lawyer will conclude his arguments on the next date of hearing, when the other defence lawyers will also make their arguments, she added.

The Kamrup Metropolitan District and Sessions Court, which is hearing the case, has set the next date of hearing on March 30.

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

Acting on a request from the state government, the Gauhati High

Court has ordered for setting up of an exclusive fast-track sessions court to conduct day-to-day trial proceedings in the case, nominating District Judge of Baksa, Sharmila Bhuyan, to preside over it.

Till the exclusive court becomes operational, the current one hearing it will conduct the hearing on a daily basis, the High Court had said.

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

A five-member special public prosecutors' team had been appointed earlier by the government for the case.

NEIF chief organiser Shyamkanu Mahanta, the singer's manager Siddharth Sharma, and his two band members, Shekhar Jyoti Goswami and Amrit *(CONTD. ON PAGE-2)*

# Premium petrol price up ₹ 2, industrial diesel up ₹ 22

*No change in normal petrol, diesel rates*

**NEW DELHI, March 20:** The price of premium or higher-grade petrol on Friday was increased by ₹ 2 per litre while the rate of bulk diesel sold to industrial users was hiked by about Rs 22 a litre, reflecting the spike in global oil prices amid conflict in the Middle-East.

However, the prices of normal petrol and diesel remain unchanged.

Premium 95-Octane petrol price in Delhi has been increased from ₹ 99.89 per litre to ₹ 101.89 per litre, industry sources said.

Alongside, bulk or industrial diesel prices were hiked from ₹ 87.67 per litre to ₹ 109.59 per litre in Delhi. Commercial diesel is used by establishments such as telecom towers to meet power requirements.

In Mumbai, industrial diesel prices have been increased from ₹ 90.39 per litre to ₹ 113.11 per litre (up ₹ 22.72 per litre); in Kolkata from ₹ 92.30 per litre to ₹Rs 114.27 per litre (up ₹ 21.97 per litre); and in Chennai from ₹ 92.54 per litre to ₹ 113.38 per litre (up ₹ 20.84 per litre).

International oil prices touched USD 119 per barrel on Thursday on the intensifying Iran war, before pulling back to around USD 108 a barrel.

A litre of normal petrol in Delhi continues to cost ₹ 94.77, while the same grade of diesel costs ₹ 87.67 a litre.

Normal petrol typically has an octane rating of 91-92 and is suitable for standard engines, offering adequate performance for everyday driving. Premium petrol, on the other hand, has a higher octane rating of 95-98, making it ideal for high-performance or high-compression engines.

At a media briefing, Sujata Sharma, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, said there is no increase in prices of normal petrol and diesel.

"Some increase is reported in the premium category, which hardly makes up for 2-4 per cent of the entire petrol (sold in the country)," she said. "There is no increase in price for the common man."

Pricing decisions, she said, are taken by oil companies independently as petrol and diesel pricing was deregulated in 2010 and 2014, respectively. "It (pricing) is decided by oil marketing companies. Government does not regulate petrol and diesel prices," she added.

The government is closely monitoring global oil markets, but there is no immediate plan to raise retail fuel prices. Oil marketing companies are expected to absorb the current cost pressure for the time being.

"Our priority is to make energy available to all consumers, which we have been doing all through the crisis. Till now we have *(CONTD. ON PAGE-2)*

*Middle East war*

# *IEA suggests carpooling, less air travel, speed curbs to ease oil shock*

**NEW DELHI, March 20:** Reducing highway speed limits by at least 10 km/h, switching to electric cooking, avoiding air travel where alternatives are possible and increasing car sharing — these are among the recommendations made in a new report by the International Energy Agency (IEA) to ease the economic impacts on consumers from oil market disruptions stemming from the Middle East war.

The conflict has triggered the largest supply disruption in the history of the global oil market, with shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, which normally carries around 20 per cent of global oil consumption, reduced to a trickle.

Around 20 million barrels per day of crude oil and oil products typically transit the Strait. The loss of these flows has tightened markets significantly, pushing crude oil prices above USD 100 per barrel and driving even sharper increases in refined products such as diesel, jet fuel and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG).

According to the report, restoring transit through the Strait remains essential to stabilise global energy markets. In the meantime, countries are acting on both supply and demand.

On March 11, IEA member countries agreed to release 400 million barrels of oil from emergency reserves — the largest stock draw in the agency's history.

"As the global energy authority, the IEA is doing everything we can to support the stability of energy markets. We have recently launched the largest ever release of IEA emergency oil stocks – and I am in close contact with key governments around the world, including major energy producers and consumers, as part of *(CONTD. ON PAGE-2)*

# Combined income of Himanta and his wife increased to ₹ 35.16 cr from ₹ 17.27 crore: Affidavit

**GUWAHATI, March 20:** The combined income of Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and his entrepreneur wife has increased two-fold to ₹ 35.16 crore in 2026 from 17.27 crore in 2021.

The 57-year-old chief minister, in his affidavit filed for his nomination as a BJP candidate for the Jalukbari constituency on Friday, submitted that he possesses only movable assets, pegged at ₹ 2.36 crore in 2026, compared to ₹ 1.72 crore in 2021.

His wife Riniki Bhuyan Sarma, the Managing Director of the media company Pride East Entertainment, possesses both movable and immovable assets that have increased to ₹ 32.79 crore in 2026 from ₹ 16.19 crore.

The CM has ₹ 2.28 lakh cash in hand and four bank deposits with a total of ₹ 68,01,943, while his wife has ₹ 3.16 lakh cash in hand and four bank deposits totalling ₹ 74,85,248.

Sarma has no investments in bonds, debentures, shares, mutual funds and others, while his wife has investments worth ₹ 5.10 crore in these categories.

The CM has no life insurance, but his wife has one valued at ₹ 1,77,55,531.

Sarma does not own any vehicle, but his wife has a jeep costing ₹ 21.60 lakh, which was bought in 2018.

The CM owns 180 gms of gold with a market value of ₹ 25.10 lakh, while Riniki owns ₹ 2.03 crore worth of 1459.221 gms of the metal.

In the immovable category, both Sarma and Riniki do not possess any agricultural land, and the CM also does not have any non-agricultural land.

Riniki owns three non-agricultural properties—two acquired and one inherited from her father—with a total current market value of ₹ 19.25 crore

She had acquired 12,960 sq ft of land on which a house was built, whose current market value is ₹ 1.60 crore, and the property inherited from her father is now valued at ₹ 1.40 crore.

Another plot of land, measuring 2127 sq ft was acquired in 2022, and its present value is ₹ 4.25 crore.

Sarma's total liabilities are ₹ 95,05 lakh, while his wife's are at ₹ 15.91 crore.

The CM has submitted that his source of income is government salary while that of his spouse is 'salary income'.

The CM included his two children's income in his affidavit for the 2021 assembly polls, but they are no longer his dependents as both are now adults.

Sarma has no cases pending against him *(CONTD. ON PAGE-2)*

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# CBDT notifies rules for simplified income tax law, to be effective from April 1

**NEW DELHI, March 20:** The Central Board of Direct Taxes on Friday notified the rules for Income-tax Act, 2025 which provided enhanced tax benefit for HRA to salary earner but makes disclosure of landlord-tenant relationship mandatory.

The Income-tax Rules, 2026 will operationalise the simplified direct tax legislation that was approved by Parliament last year and will come into effect from April 1.

"These rules may be called the Income-tax Rules, 2026. They shall come into force on the April 1, 2026," a gazette notification said.

Income Tax Rules have significantly raised transaction limits for quoting of PAN for cash deposits/withdrawal in banks, purchase of motor vehicles and property, and payment of hotel bills.

It has also led to enhancing the value of perquisites provided by employers, and making it mandatory for crypto exchanges to share information with the tax department. It also includes Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC) as an accepted mode of electronic payment.

Parliament on August 12, 2025 passed a new Income Tax Bill to replace the six-decade-old Income Tax Act, 1961. It does not impose any new tax rate and only simplified the language, which was required for understanding the complex Income Tax laws.

The Act has removed redundant provisions and archaic language and reduces the number of Sections from 819 in the Income Tax Act of 1961 to 536 and the number of chapters from 47 to 23.

The number of words had been reduced from 5.12 lakh to 2.6 lakh in the new Income Tax Bill, and for the first time, introduces 39 new tables and 40 new formulas, replacing the dense text of the 1961 law to enhance clarity.

New rules create stricter regulations around capital gains, stock exchange dealings and non-resident taxation while simplifying

other disclosure mechanisms.

The notification, introduces more than 150 official forms -- numbered from Form 33 onwards -- covering a wide range of tax-related activities.

Income tax rules retain the proposed framework for house rent allowance (HRA) exemptions applicable to salaried taxpayers. However, it has doubled the number of cities eligible for 50 per cent exemption.

Under the new rules, eight cities -- Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi, Chennai, Hyderabad, Pune, Ahmedabad, and Bengaluru -- will qualify for a higher exemption limit of 50 per cent of salary, while all other locations will continue at 40 per cent.

At present, salaried employees in Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, and Chennai are allowed to claim HRA exemption of up to 50 per cent of their salary, while those living in other locations are eligible for a lower limit of 40 per cent.

The new rules notified seek disclosure of tenant-landlord relationship for claiming I-T deductions and increased responsibility of auditors and companies for tax credit claims on foreign income.

It also entrusts auditors with greater responsibility for checking PAN duplication and tax liability arising out of adverse audit observation.

According to new rules, quoting of Permanent Account Number (PAN) will be mandatory for making cash deposits or withdrawals aggregating to ₹ 10 lakh or more in a financial year, in one or more accounts of a person.

Presently, PAN is required for cash deposits exceeding ₹ 50,000 during any one day with a banking company or a cooperative bank.

In case of purchase of motor vehicles (including motor cycles), a buyer has to quote his/her PAN if the price exceeds ₹ 5 lakh.

The current Income Tax Rules, 1962, do not provide for quoting of PAN for purchase of two-wheelers, while for motor vehicles it was mandatory irrespective of price.

In case of hotel/restaurant bills, payments made to convention centres or banquet halls or a person engaged in event management, PAN will be mandatory if the payment exceeds ₹ 1 lakh.

The current I-T Rules specify a ₹ 50,000 threshold for quoting PAN in case of hotel/restaurant bills.

In case of purchase or sale or gift or joint development agreement of any immovable property, PAN will be mandatory if the transaction cost is more than ₹ 20 lakh, as against the existing limit of ₹ 10 lakh.

It also clarifies how the holding period of assets will be calculated in specific cases to determine whether gains are short-term or long-term.

For converted securities such as shares or debentures, the holding period will include the time for which the original instrument -- like bonds, debentures, or deposit certificates -- was held before conversion.

It also entrusts auditors with greater responsibility for checking PAN duplication and tax liability arising out of adverse audit observation.

Spanning an extensive document of 1,000 pages, the rules constitute a highly detailed code comprising several hundred individual rules along with dozens of prescribed forms, reflecting the scale and depth of the new tax framework.

Commenting on the notification, Rajat Mohan, senior partner, AMRG & Associates, said these rules provide critical procedural clarity across diverse areas, including determination of fair market value, and computation of income in cross-border structures.

Notably, he said, the detailed framework for valuation of assets -- especially in the context of indirect transfers and foreign entities -- demonstrates a clear policy intent to strengthen anti-avoidance provisions while aligning with internationally accepted valuation standards.

"The new rules should greatly help employers and employees given the recalibrated and realigned limits for various employee perquisites and exemptions. While these are largely applicable for those on old regime, employees under new regime should also benefit," Deloitte India partner SureshKumar S said.

According to AKM Global managing partner Amit Maheshwari, EVs are now treated at par with cars having engine capacity not exceeding 1.6 litres for the purpose of valuing perquisites when the vehicle is used partly for official duties and partly for personal purposes as per the new rules. (PTI)

# Stock markets recover on buying in IT, PSU bank stocks; Sensex climbs 325 pts

**MUMBAI, March 20:** Benchmark stock indices Sensex and Nifty gave up most of their intra-day gains to end nearly half a per cent higher on Friday, following intense buying in PSU bank, IT and metal stocks amid concerns over a further spike in fuel-driven inflation.

In another volatile session, the 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 325.72 points or 0.44 per cent to settle at 74,532.96. During the day, it jumped 1,079.15 points, or 1.45 per cent, to 75,286.39.

The 50-share NSE Nifty edged higher by 112.35 points, or 0.49 per cent, to end at 23,114.50. Intra-day, it jumped 343 points, or 1.49 per cent, to 23,345.15. From the 30-Sensex firms, Tata Steel, Tech Mahindra, Infosys, Trent, Reliance Industries, Titan, NTPC and Sun Pharma were among the major gainers.

HDFC Bank, Bharat Electronics, Kotak Mahindra Bank and ICICI Bank were among the laggards.

Meanwhile, the price of premium or higher-grade petrol on Friday was increased by ₹ 2 per litre, and the rate of bulk diesel sold to industrial users was hiked by about ₹ 22 a litre, reflecting the spike in global oil prices amid conflict in West Asia.

"Positive comments aimed at de-escalating the conflict and avoiding attacks on oil and gas infrastructure led to a moderate rebound during the day. However, investor sentiment remains fragile, with gains tapering off as participants remain reluctant to hold positions over the weekend amid war-related uncertainties," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Investments Limited, said.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, jumped 1.88 per cent to USD 110.7 per barrel.

"Indian equities witnessed a relief-driven rebound, primarily driven by short-covering after a sharp build-up of bearish positions in the previous sessions," Hariprasad K, Research Analyst and Founder, Livelong Wealth, said. (PTI)


**PRESS RELEASE**

This is for general information that the Observers for the three LACs namely 108-Bokajan (ST), 109-Howraghat (ST) and 110-Diphu (ST) for the forthcoming Assam Legislative Assembly Elections 2026 have arrived at headquarters and shall be available for receiving representations from representatives of political parties, social organizations and the general public in matters pertaining to the free and fair conduct of the assembly elections at **Room No. 1, Old Building, Circuit House, Diphu from 10:00 am to 12 :00 Noon on weekdays till the 8th of April 2026.**

The names and contact details of the Observers are as follows :

1. General Observer: Sri S. Sivarasu, IAS (Contact No. 7637050026)
2. Police Observer: Sri Dharavath Pradeep Kumar (Contact No. 7637050028)
3.Expenditure Observer: Sri G. Kannan, IRS (Contact No. 7637050015)



**CORRIGENDUM**

Due to incorporation of **Advance Correction Slip No.11** issued by Railway Board vide L/No.2022/CE-I/CT/GCC-2022/PPLICY/Pt.I (E-3320424) Dated.13.03.2026, the provision regarding **Bid Security & Performance Guarantee for the work** have been changed against NIT **No. LMG/Engg/20 of 2026 dtd. 11/03/2026**, is hereby modified as under:-

**Tender Notice No. LMG/Engg/20 of 2026; Dated: 11-03-2026**

| EXISTING | TO BE READ AS |
|---|---|
| (i) Bid Security: ₹ 4,50,200/- | ₹ 12,00,600/- |
| (ii) Performance Guarantee: - Para 16 (4) b of Part II of GCC'22 The Successful bidder shall submit the Performance Guarantee (PG) in any of the following forms, amounting to 5% of the original contract value. | The Successful bidder shall submit the Performance Guarantee (PG) in any of the following forms, amounting to 5% of the original contract value and Additional Performance Guarantee as per clause 16(4)(h) of ACS No.11, (Advance Correction Slip Enclosed). |

Note: - Tenderer should follow Advance Correction Slips as well as all such conditions contained in Tender Document before submitting their offer.

Divisional Railway Manager (Works), Lumding

**NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY**

"SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH A SMILE"



**CORRIGENDUM NO.1**

**Corrigendum No. 1 for Tender Notice No. Sr.DEE/LMG/48 Dated: 13-03-2026. Tender No. EL-LM-25-26-45. Name of the work:** 1) Provision for one nos. of existing building including with OPL 1 renovation of toilet, Boundary wall and connecting road in OPL 1st 2) Provision for new administrative block office building double storied 1600 sq.mtr including CO chamber, 04 AC's chamber, meeting hall, Battalion office (8 dealing clerk with separate section for receipt and dispatch section) with record room, IPF office with record room, Quarter Master office with store room, security control room, BN quarter Guard, Armourer shop and 8 nos Room (Kote and Magazine room) for keeping Arms & Ammunition etc. **Tender Closing date: 11.00 hrs. on 06-04-2026. Details are as under:**

**Conditions:**

| S. No. | Condition Type | Description | Confirmation Rquired | Remarks Allowed | Docs. Upload |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Special Condition | The latest GCC with Advance Correction Slip (ACS) dated 13.03.2026 shall be followed invariably. A copy of the same is enclosed attached with the tender document for reference. | No. | No. | Not Allowed |

**Documents:**

| S. No. | Document Description | File Name |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | GCC ACS 13 03 2026 | GCCACS1113.03.2026.pdf |

For details please visit N.F. Railway website **www.ireps.gov.in**

Sr. DEE/G&Chg/Lumding

**NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY**

*Serving Customers With A Smile*


## Bengal chamber of commerce signs MoU with Intueri Consulting, Indonesian institute

**KOLKATA, March 20:** The Bengal Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCC&I) has signed an MoU with Intueri Consulting LLP and Indonesia-based Arthashastra Institute to establish a strategic consulting and research alliance for Indo-Pacific markets. The tripartite pact, signed in Kolkata, aims to create a premium consulting and policy intelligence platform spanning the India-ASEAN corridor, the chamber said on Friday.

The alliance is expected to benefit MSMEs in West Bengal and across India by providing structured access to Southeast Asian markets, it said. Kolkata is being positioned as the operational and intellectual hub of the initiative, the chamber said.

The alliance will operate across two pillars – strategic consulting covering cross-border investment, mergers and acquisitions, joint ventures, market entry, ESG compliance and government relations, and a research and thought leadership platform producing policy research, white papers and industry intelligence. It is targeting operational presence across at least eight countries within 12 months, the BCC&I said.

Under the agreement, Intueri Consulting will lead on methodology, technology and global client management, Arthashastra Institute will handle ASEAN regional expertise and Southeast Asian expansion, while BCC&I will anchor Indian market access, policy advocacy and convening power.

A three-phase rollout will begin with building joint operational infrastructure and securing initial client engagements, followed by ASEAN market expansion and collaborative research publications, before moving toward consolidation and possible formation of a Special Purpose Vehicle or Joint Venture entity, the chamber said. (PTI)

## Zomato increases food delivery platform fee to ₹ 14.90 per order

**NEW DELHI, March 20:** Food delivery aggregator Zomato has hiked the platform fee it charges users by ₹ 2.40 to ₹ 14.90 per order, its app showed on Friday. Zomato's platform fee now stands at ₹ 14.90 on a pre-GST basis, from ₹ 12.50 earlier.

Rival Swiggy has been charging a platform ₹ 14.99 inclusive of GST from its users.

According to people in the know, the hike in platform fee is on a pan-India basis in all markets where Zomato operates. It had last hiked its platform fee in September last year. Meanwhile, magicpin, the third-largest food delivery player, which currently charges a platform fee of ₹ 14.20 per order, ruled out a hike at least for the time being.

Anshoo Sharma, CEO & Founder, magicpin, said, "At a time when the food delivery ecosystem is navigating a tough phase with rising costs, we have consciously decided not to increase our platform fee to support our restaurant partners and keep food delivery accessible for customers".

The latest hike in platform fees is set to make ordering food costlier for millions of users across the country. (PTI)

*Contd. from Page 1...*

## IEA suggests carpooling

our international energy diplomacy," said IEA executive director Fatih Birol.

However, supply-side measures alone cannot fully offset the scale of the disruption. Addressing demand is a critical and immediate tool to reduce pressure on consumers by improving affordability and supporting energy security. The IEA report identifies 10 measures that can be implemented quickly by governments, businesses and households. "The war in the Middle East is creating a major energy crisis, including the largest supply disruption in the history of the global oil market. In the absence of a swift resolution, the impacts on energy markets and economies are set to become more and more severe," said Birol. The report has recommended implementing work from home where possible. "Working from home displaces oil use from commuting, particularly where jobs are suitable for remote work. Highway speed limits should be reduced by at least 10 km/h as lowering speed reduces fuel use for passenger cars, vans and trucks. A shift from private cars to buses and trains can quickly reduce oil demand," it said. The report noted that number-plate rotation schemes can reduce congestion and fuel-intensive driving. "Increase car sharing and adopt efficient driving practices, as higher car occupancy and eco-driving can lower fuel consumption quickly. Efficient driving for road commercial vehicles and delivery of goods…better driving practices, vehicle maintenance and load optimisation can cut diesel use. "Divert LPG use from transport..shifting bi-fuel and converted vehicles from LPG to gasoline can preserve LPG for cooking and other essential needs. Avoid air travel where alternative options exist, as reducing business flights can quickly ease pressure on jet fuel markets," it said. (PTI)

## Combined income of

and has not been convicted in any court of law. A Political Science student, the CM is a doctorate from Gauhati University and is a law graduate. (PTI)

## Premium petrol price

not increased the prices," she added. Meanwhile, Indian Oil Corporation in a post on social network X, said, "As global crude prices surge, stability at home matters more than ever.

"IndianOil has ensured no increase in regular automotive fuel prices in India, even amid rising international costs. A limited revision applies only to premium petrol XP-95, with minimal impact on overall consumption. Through evolving global conditions, the focus remains clear: consistent supply, responsible pricing, and service you can rely on. Retail petrol and diesel prices have been frozen since April 2022, with fuel retailers like Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) absorbing losses when crude prices are high and making profits when rates are low.

This meant that when global fuel prices went up in response to elevated crude prices, prices were stable in India. And when softening of crude prices pushed down fuel rates globally, rates in India remained unchanged.

The government wants to continue to shield consumers, and the same policy will continue unless there is a huge spike in crude prices. India imports 88 per cent of its crude oil needs and roughly half of its natural gas requirement. These mostly come via the Strait of Hormuz. Following the US and Israeli attacks on Iranian government, military and nuclear facilities, Iran warned shipping away from the strait, and insurers withdrew coverage, effectively halting tanker movements. Prices had risen to USD 119 per barrel in June 2022 in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. That year, oil companies had nominal profits, but in FY24, they posted record ₹ 81,000 crore profit, helping make up for past dent in margins.

This year, the three companies have posted ₹ 23,743 crore profit in the December quarter alone. (PTI)

## Tuliram confident of

logistics and security, track campaign expenditure, and ensure adherence to the Model Code of Conduct.

With nominations underway and monitoring mechanisms in place, the electoral contest in the Karbi Anglong region is expected to be closely fought.

## Zubeen death case

Prabha Mahanta, are facing murder charges, while his cousin and suspended Assam Police DSP Sandipan Garg is charged with culpable homicide not amounting to murder. Garg's two PSOs, Nandeswar Bora and Prabin Baishya, are also in jail, charged with criminal conspiracy and criminal breach of trust by misappropriating funds or property entrusted to them. A separate enquiry is also underway by local authorities in Singapore, with a coroner's court recently ruling out foul play and stating that Garg was severely intoxicated and had drowned off Lazarus Island after declining a life jacket. (PTI)

## Himanta's family says

the last several elections and will do the same this time," Bhuyan Sarma said.

On her son's presence during nomination filing, she said he had come "to support his father" and had also attended the previous nomination event. Bhuyan Sarma is the managing director of media company Pride East Entertainment. The CM's son, Nandil Biswa Sarma, said, "Everything has been great so far. We are grateful to God". "I am feeling very happy for him, and there is nothing more to say on this," he added.

Nandil, a law student at National Law University, Bengaluru, said he would attend his father's last rally in Jalukbari constituency, likely on April 6 or 7. The CM had earlier said his wife would visit religious places in the constituency as part of the campaign, while his son would return to his studies.

His daughter, who wished to attend the nomination filing, could not do so due to her examinations.

Sarma filed nomination papers at the Kamrup (Metropolitan) District Commissioner's office here, seeking re-election from Jalukbari constituency for the sixth term in a row.

The last date for filing of nomination papers is March 23, scrutiny of papers will be held the next day, and the last date of withdrawal is March 26. Elections to the 126-member assembly will be held on April 9, and the votes will be counted on May 4. (PTI)

## Debabrata Saikia files

confidence in winning his seat, as well as the opposition alliance coming to power in the state, ending the 10-year-long rule of the BJP-led NDA. Counting of votes for the 126-member Assam Assembly will be done on May 4. (PTI)

## NDA-constituent Bodoland

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 an Independent legislator as well. (PTI)

## Cong, Raijor Dal

Dalgaon, Sissi Borgaon, Digboi, Bokakhat, Manas, Tezpur and Kaliabor, among others.

Meanwhile, Raijor Dal candidate Dr Gyanashree Bora filed her nomination papers from the Mariani constituency on Thursday. She was accompanied by supporters and a jhumur troupe during the filing.

Dr Bora, a former party spokesperson, recently resigned from her post as Assistant Professor at Goalpara College to enter electoral politics. She said her decision to contest was driven by a desire to contribute to a better future and to counter what she described as politics of hate and negativity.

## Lurinjyoti Gogoi files

nomination, Gogoi exuded confidence about wrestling the seat from the ruling BJP. "My objective is to be the voice of people of the constituency as well as people of the state. I seek their blessings," the AJP chief said.

Polling for the 126-member assembly will be held on April 9, and counting of votes will take place on May 4. (PTI)

## Modi expected to

with him and their son in the vehicle.

Prior to setting out to file the papers, the chief minister sought the blessings of his mother Mrinalini Devi.

''Auspicious occasions should always begin with mother's blessings. Though I don't get to spend much time with her these days, her blessings always power me to continue serving Aai Asomi (mother Assam),'' Sarma said in a post on X. After filing his papers, Sarma urged people to bless him and all candidates of the BJP and its two alliance partners -- the AGP and the BPF. He thanked the people of his constituency for coming from far and near despite the heavy rain. The CM said that several new areas have been included in his constituency, which was realigned during the delimitation exercise. ''It will take some time to get the people of these areas, but I am confident that they will bless and support him,'' Sarma said. He said that it will not be possible for him to campaign extensively in his own constituency, as he has to go to other seats for canvassing. ''The party workers will take care of my campaign.... I will also try to go and Riniki (his wife) will also visit some places,'' he said, adding that he will address five to six meetings in a day.

Regarding campaigning by national leaders, Sarma said Prime Minister Narendra Modi is expected to address three meetings and Union Home Minister Amit Shah will address six to eight. A meeting will also be held this evening to finalise the plan. Sarma has represented Jalukbari under the Gauhati Lok Sabha constituency since 2001 and seeks to retain it for the sixth consecutive term in the polls.

He first contested this seat in 1996 as a Congress candidate, losing to late AGP leader Bhrigu Kumar Phukan by 17,000 votes but he wrested the seat from him in 2001, winning by a margin of 10,000 votes.

Sarma's winning spree continued, and the victory margin kept increasing in each poll, and he achieved a record win by 1,01,000 in 2021. He joined the BJP in 2015. The last date for filing of nomination papers was March 23, scrutiny of papers will be held the next day, and the last date of withdrawal is March 26.

Elections to the 126-member assembly will be held on April 9, and the votes will be counted on May 4. (PTI)

## 116 candidates file

Phukan from Dibrugarh and Ashok Singhal from Dhekiajuli have also filed their nomination papers.

Former BJP president and minister Bhabesh Kalita has also filed his papers from Rangia

United Peoples' Party Liberal (UPPL) President Pramod Boro from Tamulpur and CPI(M)'s sitting MLA Manoranjan Talukdar from Bhowanipur-Sorbhog also filed their nominations during the day.

Former state Congress president and Rajya Sabha MP Ripun Bora from Barchalla, former Congress minister Pranatee Phukan from Naharkatiya and sitting MLA Nurul Huda from Rupahihat have filed their nominations on Friday. The last date for filing of nomination papers is March 23, scrutiny of papers will be held the next day and the last date of withdrawal is March 26. Elections to the 126-member assembly will be held on April 9, and the votes will be counted on May 4. (PTI)

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*Bodo Goanbura Association pledges to curb polygamy, child marriage and witch-hunting*

# KADBGA adopts resolutions against social evils at annual convention

**HT Correspondent**

**HOWRAGHAT, March 20:** The Karbi Anglong District Bodo Goanbura Association (KADBGA) held its 17th annual one-day convention in Langhin on Friday, marking a significant step towards social reform within the community. The gathering concluded with resolutions aimed at addressing deep-rooted social issues, including polygamy, child marriage and superstitions associated with witch-hunting.

The event began with the ceremonial hoisting of the organisational flag by KADBGA president Munindra Narzary, followed by an open public meeting where community leaders and representatives discussed the future development of the Bodo community. The convention saw the participation of Chief Guest Bilimohan Khakhlari, Executive Member of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, along with several hundred village headmen who attended from different regions, including Howraghat, Langhin, Phuloni, Diphu and Dengaon.

A key outcome of the convention was a collective pledge to modernise social practices. The association formally resolved to combat harmful superstitions that often lead to violence and branding of individuals as witches, ensure the protection and education of minors and promote stable and progressive family structures.

Community leaders stressed the importance of unity and vigilance in achieving peace and development across economic, educational and cultural spheres. The meeting also focused on the overall development of the Bodo people residing in Karbi Anglong.

The association announced that the 18th annual convention will be hosted under the Daima Daicha Regional Branch in Howraghat next year.

# ECI steps up poll preparedness in Karbi Anglong

*Observers deployed; strict monitoring on media, digital campaigns*

**HT Bureau**

**DIPHU/HAMREN, March 20:** As the state moves toward the single-phase General Assam Legislative Assembly Election on April 9, 2026, administrative preparations in the Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong districts have entered a critical phase. Key observers have arrived to oversee the process and specific directives for media personnel and political campaigning have been issued.

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has stationed three high-level observers for the constituencies of 108-Bokajan (ST), 109-Howraghat (ST) and 110-Diphu (ST). These officials will ensure the conduct of free and fair elections and will also address grievances from the public and political organisations.

The observers are available in Room No 1, Old Building, Circuit House, Diphu, from 10 AM to 12 noon on all weekdays until April 8. The observers include General Observer S Sivarasu, IAS (7637050026), Police Observer Dharavath Pradeep Kumar (7637050028) and Expenditure Observer G Kannan, IRS (7637050015).

In West Karbi Anglong, the District Election Officer (DEO) has outlined procedures for media professionals to exercise their franchise through postal ballot. Media personnel must submit Form 12D, which can be collected, filled and submitted at the Postal Ballot Cell at the DC Office, Hamren, on or before March 21, 2026. Media persons registered in other districts but working in West Karbi Anglong can also apply at the Hamren cell for necessary arrangements. The schedule for casting these votes will be notified by the DEO after completion of the nomination phase.

The district administration has also enforced strict ECI guidelines regarding the Media Certification and Monitoring Committee (MCMC) to curb paid news and misinformation. All political advertisements on TV, radio, social media, e-papers and bulk SMS must be approved by the MCMC before broadcast. Candidates are required to declare their authentic social media handles in their affidavits during nomination.

Political parties must also submit a detailed statement of digital campaign expenses, including content creation and advertisements, within 75 days of the election's conclusion. The ECI is working in coordination with IT nodal officers and social media platforms to take immediate action against fake news.

## BJP cedes Teok seat to AGP; Bikash Saikia named candidate

**HT Correspondent;**

**JORHAT, March 20:** Putting an end to all speculation, the BJP has finally left the important Teok constituency in Jorhat to its ally, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), in the interest of the alliance.

For a long time, discussions had been ongoing regarding which party would contest from the Teok constituency. Since Teok is considered a stronghold of the AGP, its party workers were unwilling to give it up. After the recent delimitation, the size of the constituency increased significantly and BJP workers were also demanding that a BJP candidate be fielded from there.

However, through mutual discussions, the BJP eventually ceded the seat to the AGP. Accordingly, the AGP has selected Bikash Saikia, a long-time party worker, as its candidate for the important Teok constituency. Saikia said that he would file his nomination on the 23rd and acknowledged that the Teok constituency faces many issues. He assured that efforts would be made to resolve these problems with the cooperation of the people. He further stated that both the BJP and AGP will continue to work towards solving public issues in the coming days. Meanwhile, the procession that began near Kakodonga bridge in Jorhat reached the district AGP office, where hundreds of supporters congratulated him before proceeding towards Teok.

## Daniel Langthasa files nomination for Haflong (ST) seat

**HT Correspondent**

**HAFLONG, March 20:** The political atmosphere in Dima Hasao has intensified as Daniel Langthasa officially filed his nomination for the upcoming Assam Legislative Assembly Election 2026 from the 113-Haflong (ST) constituency, representing the National People's Party (NPP). Following the filing of his nomination, Langthasa led a massive rally through the main streets of Haflong, accompanied by a large number of supporters and party workers. Earlier, he held a brief meeting with NPP members, where discussions focused on safeguarding tribal rights, protecting the provisions of the Sixth Schedule and addressing concerns over development in the district. Langthasa's entry marks a significant moment, as he becomes one of the prominent NPP candidates in Dima Hasao, with considerable influence in Haflong and other parts of the district. His strong grassroots connection, particularly among the youth is expected to make the contest highly competitive.

The upcoming election is shaping into a triangular battle, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (Congress) also fielding their candidates. While the BJP is banking on its organisational strength and governance agenda, the Congress aims to regain its traditional support base in the hill district.

With the NPP entering the fray with momentum, the stage is now set for a high-voltage electoral contest in Haflong, as all three parties gear up for a decisive political showdown.

## NFR reports major rise in solar power generation

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, March 20:** Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) has made significant progress in its commitment towards green energy and sustainability, achieving substantial growth in solar power installation across its divisions and units. As of February 2026, the total installed solar capacity across NFR has reached 31.890 MWp since the launch of its solarisation initiative in 2011. During the current financial year 2025–26 alone, an additional 22.734 MWp capacity has been installed, reflecting accelerated efforts towards renewable energy adoption.

Among the divisions, Lumding (including Guwahati portion) has recorded the highest cumulative installation of 13.334 MWp, followed by Rangiya division with 8.941 MWp. Other divisions such as Alipurduar, Katihar and Tinsukia have also contributed significantly to the overall capacity enhancement. The solar installations have resulted in notable operational benefits. During 2025–26 (till February 2026), the average monthly solar energy generation stands at approximately 9.18 lakh units, leading to an average monthly financial saving of about ₹ 68.80 lakh. This highlights NFR's focused approach towards reducing carbon footprint while optimising energy expenditure.

Further strengthening its green energy portfolio, NFR currently has 19.14 MWp of additional solar capacity under various stages of implementation across divisions. Major upcoming installations are planned in Lumding, Rangiya, Katihar and Alipurduar divisions, which are expected to significantly enhance the overall renewable energy capacity in the near future. These initiatives underline Northeast Frontier Railway's commitment to sustainable development and its proactive role in supporting Indian Railways vision of becoming a net-zero carbon emitter. The ongoing solarisation efforts not only contribute to environmental conservation but also ensure long-term economic benefits through reduced energy costs.

## Sonitpur unveils 'Ganabandhu' mascot to boost voter awareness

**HT Correspondent**

**TEZPUR, March 20:** The District Election Officer of Sonitpur, Ananda Kumar Das, unveiled the official District Election Mascot "Ganabandhu" (Brahmaputra river dolphin) for the Assembly Elections 2026 and inaugurated a selfie point within the premises of the District Commissioner's Office, Sonitpur, as part of ongoing SVEEP activities aimed at enhancing voter awareness. The event was attended by SVEEP Cell In-charge ADC Kuldip Hazarika, along with other assisting officers of the cell and officials of the district administration. On the occasion, two PwD voters were felicitated with "fulam gamusa" by the DC-cum-DEO in recognition of their participation in the democratic process. Further, around 12 e-rickshaws displaying voter awareness pamphlets were flagged off from the DC office premises to disseminate awareness messages across the district.

# Jorhat unveils 'Jolou' mascot to boost voter awareness ahead of 2026 polls

**HT Correspondent**

**JORHAT, March 20:** The District Election Officer and District Commissioner of Jorhat, Jay Shivani, unveiled the official mascot 'Jolou' ahead of the upcoming 2026 Assembly elections. The mascot has been introduced as a symbol of awareness and motivation, aimed at encouraging voters—particularly first-time voters, to exercise their franchise responsibly and actively participate in the democratic process.

The mascot was created by a student who had secured first place in a district-level mascot competition held during the district celebrations in 2025. Its unveiling is part of efforts to enhance voter awareness and promote greater participation in elections.

A special programme was also organised under the SVEEP (Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation) initiative of the Election Commission of India. The programme aims to educate citizens about the importance of voting, electoral procedures and their role in strengthening democracy.

As part of the event, a voter pledge ceremony was conducted by officials associated with the SVEEP cell. Several senior administrative officials, election authorities and students from various colleges attended the programme.

In another initiative, the district administration has announced a Voter Awareness Competition under the SVEEP programme ahead of the elections. The competition aims to promote awareness through creativity, with categories such as digital poster making, drawing and slogan writing. Participants can submit entries online with the deadline set for March 23, 2026. Citizens and students have been encouraged to actively take part and contribute to strengthening democratic engagement.

# BJP names Shiladitya Dev for Hojai seat

**HT Correspondent**

**HOJAI, March 20:** The controversy over the BJP ticket for the 63rd Hojai Assembly seat in the upcoming Assam Assembly elections has come to an end with the party naming former MLA Shiladitya Dev as its candidate. The announcement sparked celebrations across Hojai, with party workers and supporters bursting firecrackers and raising slogans in his favour.

On Friday, a massive bike rally from Dimarupar welcomed the BJP candidate, which later turned into a grand procession across the town. Supporters raised slogans such as "Once again Modi government, once again BJP government in Assam" and expressed strong backing for Shiladitya Dev.

Speaking to reporters during the rally, Shiladitya Dev thanked Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma for giving him the ticket, stating that the Chief Minister had kept his promise after denying him a ticket in 2021. He said his candidature would accelerate development in Hojai and announced that he would file his nomination papers on March 23 at Srimanta Sankaradev Nagar.

Meanwhile, sitting MLA Ramkrishna Ghosh, who was denied the party ticket, expressed deep dismay over the decision. He said he could not "buy" a ticket by flattering anyone and questioned the party's selection process. Ghosh termed it unfortunate that long-time BJP workers were being ignored while recent entrants from the Congress were being given tickets, also raising the issue of local versus outsider candidates.

## 3 BJP candidates file nominations in Nagaon amid show of strength

**HT Correspondent**

**NAGAON, March 20:** In a show of strength, three BJP candidates — Rupak Sarma, Jitu Goswami and Shashikanta Das — filed their nominations for the upcoming Assembly elections in Nagaon district amidst a huge gathering of supporters here on Friday. Rupak Sarma, contesting from the Nagaon-Batadroba constituency for the third time, filed his nomination amidst a massive rally. He credited the crowd to the party's growing popularity and thanked the people for their support. Sarma also paid obeisance to Guru Srimanta Sankardev at the Bordowa Sattra, seeking his blessings.

Jitu Goswami, contesting from the Barhampur constituency for the second time, filed his nomination with a large contingent of supporters. He thanked the party leadership and the people for their trust. When asked about his rival, Rajen Gohain, Goswami said he was his political guru and that the election was a battle between ideologies. Shashikanta Das, contesting from the Raha (SC) constituency, filed his nomination amidst a procession. He thanked the party leadership and said the election was a united fight against the Congress. Das also met AGP leaders and workers at the party's district office, seeking their support.

# UPPL, BPF candidates file nominations across BTR

**HT Correspondent**

**KOKRAJHAR, March 20:** Eight candidates of the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL), including president Pramod Boro, filed their nominations on Friday from different constituencies to contest the upcoming Assembly elections 2026.

UPPL candidate for Tamulpur LAC and Rajya Sabha MP Pramod Boro filed his nomination before the returning officer at the DC office in Tamulpur. He was accompanied by Assam cabinet minister and founder president of UPPL, Urkhao Gwra Brahma, along with several senior party leaders.

UPPL candidate for Dotma LAC and party general secretary Raju Kumar Narzary filed his nomination before the returning officer at the DC office in Kokrajhar in the presence of Rajya Sabha MP and party working president Rwngwra Narzary, senior leader Reorea Narzary and other party members.

Sitting MLA and UPPL candidate for Kokrajhar LAC, Lawrence Islary, also filed his nomination to contest the ensuing Assembly elections. UPPL candidates for Gossaigaon and Parbatjhora LACs, Aninda Basumatary and Ayub Hussain Mondal, filed their nominations before the returning officers at the DC office in Kokrajhar.

UPPL candidate for Udalguri LAC, Dipen Boro, filed his nomination at the DC office in Udalguri, accompanied by UPPL president Pramod Boro, cabinet minister Urkhao Gwra Brahma and other senior leaders. UPPL candidates for Sidli and Bijni LACs, Ranjit Basumatary and Kamalsingh Narzary respectively, filed their nominations before the returning officer at the DC office in Kajalgaon in Chirang district.

After filing his nomination, UPPL president and former CEM of the Bodoland Territorial Region, Pramod Boro, said he is contesting from the Tamulpur constituency and that the party is fielding candidates in 19 constituencies, including 15 LACs in the BTR and four outside the region. He expressed confidence that the UPPL is receiving widespread support across communities and will work for the welfare and development of the people.

Meanwhile, BPF candidate for Sidli LAC and BTC executive member Paniram Brahma filed his nomination before the returning officer at the DC office in Kajalgaon, Chirang district. BPF candidate for Udalguri LAC and deputy CEM of BTC, Rihan Daimary, also filed his nomination at the DC office in Udalguri.

Assam cabinet minister and BPF candidate for Mazbat LAC, Charan Boro, filed his nomination to contest the Assembly elections from the Mazbat constituency. He was accompanied by several senior party leaders and well-wishers during the filing process.

## Piyush Hazarika, Ramakanta Deuri and AIUDF's Siddique Ahmed enter fray

**HT Correspondent**

**MORIGAON, March 20:** Two heavyweight candidates of the BJP for the 52 No Jagiroad constituency and 54 No Morigaon constituency, Piyush Hazarika and Ramakanta Deuri, respectively filed their nomination papers to contest in their constituencies. Earlier, former minister for Water Resources and Information & Public Relations Piyush Hazarika, along with his family members and a large number of supporters, offered prayers at Deusal Mondir before proceeding to Morigaon, where he filed his nomination before the Returning Officer of Jagiroad.

Meanwhile, BJP candidate for the 54 No Morigaon constituency, Ramakanta Deuri, who has received the party ticket for the third consecutive time, filed his nomination before the Returning Officer in Morigaon. On the other hand, the AIUDF candidate for the 53 No Laharighat constituency, Siddique Ahmed, also filed his nomination before the Returning Officer in Laharighat.

## Prasanta Phukan files nomination from Dibrugarh, eyes record 5th term

**HT Correspondent**

**DIBRUGARH, March 20:** Senior BJP leader and Power Minister Prasanta Phukan filed his nomination papers on Friday for the Dibrugarh Assembly constituency, seeking a fifth consecutive term.

Accompanied by a large procession of party workers and supporters, the 71-year-old leader began the march from the Old High School Field and concluded at the Dibrugarh District Commissioner's office.

Phukan, who became the first BJP candidate to win the Dibrugarh seat in 2006, has seen his victory margin grow significantly over successive elections.

In his debut election in 2006, he defeated sitting Congress MLA Dr Kalyan Kumar Gogoi by a narrow margin of 175 votes, securing 28,424 votes against Gogoi's 28,249.

In 2011, contesting against Dr Gogoi again, Phukan won by 19,609 votes, polling 46,506 votes compared to Gogoi's 26,897.

*Soft release centre to aid conservation efforts and boost declining population*

# Five slender-billed vultures translocated at Tewaripal in Biswanath

**HT Correspondent**

**BISWANATH CHARIALI, March 20:** Five slender-billed vultures were translocated from the Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre at Rani to the Biswanath Wildlife Division's vulture soft release centre at Tewaripal, under the anti-poaching camp in the western range, on Friday. The vultures will be released into the wild after a period of 2–3 months, following the soft release method. It is a collaborative project of the Bombay Natural History Society, Kaziranga and the Assam Forest Department.

The vulture translocation event was attended by and the vultures were released inside the aviary jointly by Dr Sonali Ghosh (Director of Kaziranga National Park), Ritu Paban Borah (DFO, Biswanath) Dr Vinay Gupta (PCCF, Assam), Piraisoodan B (Director of Nameri National Park) Praveen Pardeshi (president, BNHS) Kishore Rithe (Director, BNHS) Sachin Ranade (Assistant Director, BNHS) and heads of nearby EDCs. "This event will play a crucial role in stabilising the drastically declining slender-billed vulture population," said Gitartha Borah, Biologist, BNHS.

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**QUOTE OF THE DAY**

*Most people have the will to win, few have the will to prepare to win. -Bobby Knight*

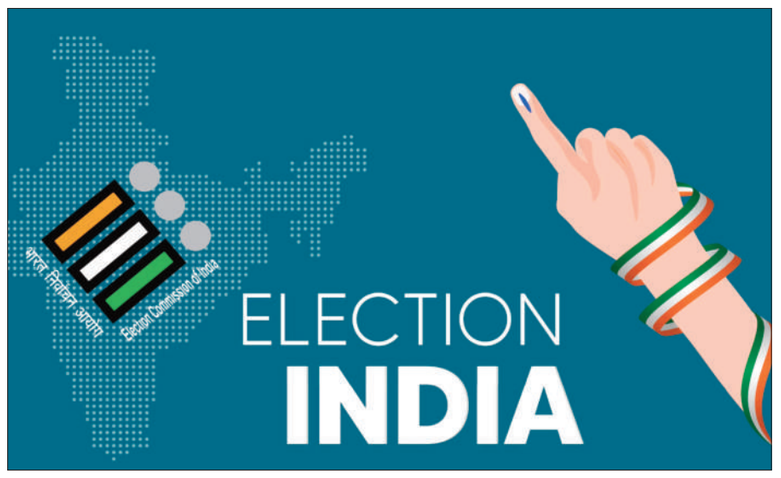
## Larijani's killing big jolt to Tehran

Another key leader of Iran was assassinated in an Israeli raid on Tuesday, leaving the country even more deeper in a stormy sea with lost leadership. Ali Larijani, who was the head of national security of Iran, and was reportedly virtually leading the country since the death of killing of the supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei in the US-Israeli bombing. After the assassination of Ali Khamenei, Iran supreme leader, along with some forty top leaders of Iran, there was a power vacuum, which was partly filled by Ali Larijani. The chosen successor of Khamenei, his second son, Mojtaba Khamenei, was also reported to have been seriously injured in another daring raid on the Iranian leadership. Ever since his election to the top position, and reports of his injury, Mojtaba was not seen or heard in person, instead his message was read out. Larijani, who has been a prominent figure in the top echelons of Iran's political structure, had been playing a vital role. Larijani was widely experienced as a senior diplomat who had held negotiations with the West for the nuclear accord. Larijani was also the speaker of the Iranian parliament for as long as eleven years and was closely cued up to the ways of the country's top elites.

Larijani was very close to the slain supreme leader Khamenei and had been framing Iran responses in diplomatic issues. Over the years Larijani had emerged as a deft and practical politician. He was believed to have been middle of the road person and not too much of a hardliner. However, after the death of the supreme leader he had been known to have pursued a very tough line in the current confrontation. The removal of Larijani from the scene would mean it would be even more difficult to find a practical politician with whom US-Israeli negotiators could have held parleys. It is now becoming increasingly difficult to find people with whom the outside world could hold talks for an end of the current war.

Larijani is one of five brothers who were all highly placed and had key roles in the country ruling dispensation. One of Larijani's brothers was the head of Iran's judicial structure. The ochre brothers were also in key positions. Meanwhile, there are reports floating about the death of incapacity of the immediate successor of supreme leader Ali Khamenei. Some reports had indicated Mojtaba was in Russia receiving urgent medical treatment in Moscow. However, the Iranian ambassador to Russia has denied the report of his injury or medical treatment there. Opening up some back channel diplomacy for defusing the situation had assumed greater importance as the USA finds itself totally isolated. The European Union leaders have bluntly refused to take part in American offensive on Iran.

# Clean Elections and the Future of Democracy




**DEGREE OF THOUGHT**

**By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan**

The fundamental foundation of democracy is not safeguarded solely by the governing system; rather, it deeply depends on the moral responsibility of every citizen. Elections are a process through which the people exercise their sovereign power to determine the governing authority of a nation. Whenever this process is clean and transparent, the true beauty of democracy is revealed. The concept of electoral transparency does not merely refer to a peaceful environment on the day of voting; its scope is much broader. It includes transparency in election expenditure, the ethics of candidate selection, and the impartiality of institutions like the Election Commission. If any form of corruption enters the electoral process, it pushes the nation's future into darkness. The progress and stability of a country depend on how credible its electoral system is. When an ordinary voter can express their opinion without selling their conscience to any force or temptation, only then is democracy protected. The future of democracy stands upon this electoral integrity, and any deviation from it can weaken the entire national structure. Therefore, the idea of clean elections must not remain merely a legal process; it has now become a pressing necessity for it to evolve into a social movement.

The negative influence of money power in the political system creates a major obstacle to electoral transparency and can undermine the very purpose of democracy. The enormous financial transactions that take place during elections often push honest and capable candidates out of the competition. When the criterion for a candidate shifts from public service or knowledge to financial strength, it creates an unhealthy environment in society. If there is no accountability regarding the source and expenditure of this money, it encourages corruption. Decisions made by voters under the influence of money can never serve the overall welfare of the nation. The dominance of money power further exploits the lower sections of society and concentrates power in the hands of a few. For clean elections, it is essential that the sources of election funding remain completely transparent to the public. If political parties do not maintain clear accounts of their income and expenditure, they tend to prioritize the interests of their financiers over public welfare once they come to power. As a result, there is no meaningful improvement in the lives of ordinary people. Therefore, without economic transparency, neither clean elections nor the future of democracy can be bright. To address this serious issue, strict legal measures are necessary, along with the development of a high level of ethical standards among political parties.

The independence and impartiality of the administrative machinery or commission that conducts elections form one of the most crucial pillars in protecting democratic values. When the Election Commission can perform its duties without any external pressure or governmental interference, public trust in the electoral process increases. This institution must ensure a level playing field for all political parties. Although the use of modern technology and information exchange can make the electoral system more transparent, public confidence in these technologies is equally important. Any technical flaw or suspicious activity can mislead public opinion. To ensure clean elections, election officials must perform their duties with utmost honesty, as any bias can shake the foundation of democracy. In a democratic system, the trust of voters is the greatest asset, and maintaining that trust is the full responsibility of the institution managing the elections. If a voter feels that their vote has not been properly counted or that there is hidden manipulation in the process, they may withdraw from participating in elections, which is not a positive sign for democracy. Therefore, maintaining transparency and a clean image is not merely a matter of rules; it is a moral necessity.

Public awareness and education are integral components of clean elections. A conscious voter never casts their vote based on caste, religion, or communal emotions. When a citizen is guided by education and wisdom, they are capable of evaluating a candidate's competence and principles. During elections, divisive politics often emerges, where attempts are made to capture power by instigating hatred among people. In such situations, if voters are not aware, the concept of clean elections will remain nothing more than an illusion. Only through the spread of democratic education in society will people realize that their single vote has the power to change the governance of the country. For clean elections, it is essential that the public is aware of the code of conduct, and if any candidate or party violates these rules, people must have the courage to stand against it. Awareness across all sections of society ensures that no unethical force can misuse the electoral process for personal gain. The responsibility of an educated and conscious citizen is not limited to casting a vote; it also includes closely monitoring the electoral process to prevent irregularities. This awakening among the public is the strongest guarantee of clean elections.

The role of the media is extremely important and indispensable for clean elections and the future of democracy. When the media presents truthful information to the public with impartiality and courage, flaws in the electoral system can be easily identified. By exposing irregularities, corruption, or the questionable background of candidates, the media helps voters make informed decisions. However, when the media is driven by the interests of a particular political party or group, it loses its credibility as the fourth pillar of democracy. False news or misleading information can manipulate public opinion during elections, thereby hindering the goal of clean elections. The responsibility of the media should be to provide accurate and fact-based information so that people can choose their representatives wisely. Analyzing election campaigns and distinguishing between truth and falsehood is a fundamental duty of journalism. The ethical standards of the media are crucial for clean elections because of its power to influence public thinking. If the media remains fair and impartial, no candidate will dare to adopt unethical means. Therefore, a strong and unbiased media is essential for a healthy democracy and for ensuring clean elections.

With changing circumstances, it has become necessary to amend electoral laws and make them more stringent. The criminalization of politics has emerged as a significant challenge, and there must be a strong legal framework to prevent such individuals from participating in elections. Clean elections cannot be ensured merely through regulations; they must also be connected to the mindset of society. Internal democracy within political parties can also contribute positively to clean elections. When parties give space to competent and principled individuals, the overall electoral environment naturally improves.

The true essence of democracy lies in the quality of public participation. If the electoral process becomes merely a game of numbers without any value for principles and ethics, it will send a dangerous message to future generations. The more transparent and clean our electoral system becomes, the stronger our democratic traditions will be. In this entire process, there is a collective responsibility of the government, opposition parties, the Election Commission, and every conscious citizen of the country. Only by fulfilling this responsibility can we build a prosperous and corruption-free society where the value and rights of every individual are protected.

# How the bombing of world's largest natural gas deposit is putting Global LNG supply in chaos?

**By: T N Ashok**

Beneath the turquoise waters of the Persian Gulf, straddling the maritime border between Iran and Qatar, lies what may be the single most consequential piece of real estate on earth. The South Pars/North Dome field is the world's largest natural gas reservoir, holding an estimated 1,800 trillion cubic feet of natural gas — enough, according to some estimates, to supply the entire planet for thirteen years.

For decades, this geological giant slumbered as a shared but quietly contested asset. Today, it is a battlefield. And the world is paying the price.

A Field Divided — By Geography, Ambition, and Fate; The Iranian portion, called South Pars, accounts for roughly 70 to 75 percent of Iran's total domestic gas production, while Qatar's side — the North Field — underpins the country's position as one of the world's largest LNG exporters, supplying roughly 20 percent of global LNG demand.

The two sides of the same geological formation have followed starkly divergent paths. Qatar has signed $39 billion in contracts with major international energy companies to develop the North Field, while Iran — despite possessing the second-largest gas reserves in the world after Russia — faces chronic domestic shortages, with winter deficits reaching 250 million cubic meters per day.

Iran's underperformance is not geological. It is political. Sanctions, mismanagement, and isolation have left Tehran extracting a fraction of what Doha has built into a global empire. This disparity matters enormously now that the war has begun.

The Strike That Changed Everything; On March 18, 2026, an Israeli air raid targeted treatment facilities at Asaluyeh, the onshore processing hub for Iran's South Pars field. The governor of Asaluyeh confirmed the facilities were "taken offline" to control fires, with no immediate disclosure of production losses.

Initial reports revealed that the damage caused to sections of South Pars makes up nearly 12 percent of Iran's total gas production. While US officials denied prior coordination, one Israeli official told CNN that the strike was carried out in coordination with the US.

The irony is extraordinary. Israel — and arguably the US — struck a field that is geologically inseparable from Qatar's North Dome, a nation that hosts the largest American military base in the Middle East. Qatar's Foreign Ministry spokesperson described the strike as "dangerous and irresponsible," emphasizing that "Iran's South Pars gas field is an extension of Qatar's North Field."

This is not diplomatic language. It is a geological acknowledgment of a shared fate. Trump responded by threatening to "massively blow up the entirety" of South Pars if Iran continued striking Qatar — a threat of almost surreal circularity: threatening to destroy the world's largest gas field to protect a country whose gas field is the same reservoir.

Iran's Retaliation: Turning the Gulf into a Target Map; Iran's response was swift and strategic. Iranian authorities announced that five facilities in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar would be targeted, naming Saudi Arabia's SAMREF refinery and Jubail petrochemical complex, the UAE's Al Hosn gas field, and Qatar's Ras Laffan refinery and Mesaieed petrochemical complex.

These are not random choices. They are the arteries of the Gulf's petro-economy — refining hubs, LNG terminals, and export nodes that feed Europe, Asia, and South Asia. Iranian aerial attacks caused extensive damage to the world's largest gas plant in Qatar, targeted a refinery in Saudi Arabia, forced the UAE to shut gas facilities, and set off fires at two Kuwaiti refineries.

Qatar has been forced to halt all gas production due to Iran's counterattacks, disrupting global supplies and the production of fertilizer. Bahrain's Bapco refinery was struck. Dubai's airport — previously the world's busiest for international flights — was shut briefly by a drone strike on a fuel tank nearby. Iran's attacks and threats have nearly halted shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, sending petroleum prices soaring 40 percent and roiling the global economy.

Can these facilities be resurrected? The short answer is: some yes, some slowly, and some perhaps not for years. Surface damage to refineries and LNG terminals can take 6 to 18 months to repair under peacetime conditions.

But damage to Ras Laffan could delay Qatar's ability to get supplies to the market even after the war ends. South Pars, meanwhile, was already aging. Iran would need to invest at least $40 billion in pressure-boosting facilities to sustain output — a technology monopolized by Western companies that Iran cannot access under sanctions. Strike damage compounds an already terminal infrastructure decline.

Who Bears the Pain? The Regional Supply Shock; The impact is not evenly distributed. Japan relies on the Middle East for about 90 percent of its crude oil imports, mostly through Hormuz. South Korea gets about 70 percent of its crude from the Middle East and routes more than 95 percent of that through the strait.

Vietnam maintains oil reserves estimated to last less than 20 days; Pakistan and Indonesia around 20 days. For South Asia, particularly Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka — where energy import bills already strain sovereign finances — oil at $100-plus per barrel is not an economic inconvenience. It is a governance crisis.

Europe faces a different but serious problem. Natural gas prices in Europe surged from €30/MWh before the war to above €60/MWh within days — nearly double — before partially retreating. Some 30 percent of Europe's supply of jet fuel originates from or transits via the strait, while one-fifth of global LNG supply passes through the waterway. The continent spent two years diversifying away from Russian gas after 2022, only to find itself dependent on Qatari LNG — which is now under fire.

The Winners: Moscow and Beijing. The conflict is materially improving Russia's competitive position in crude oil markets. With Middle East barrels facing logistical disruption, both India and China face strong incentives to deepen reliance on Russian supply. Russia, whose energy revenues were squeezed by Western sanctions and price caps, now finds its oil suddenly in demand at premium prices by energy-desperate Asian nations.

For Moscow, this war is a windfall. China is better positioned than most, due to its partnership with Iran and Russia, allowing it to import pipeline natural gas overland from Russia.

Iran has reportedly allowed Chinese vessels to pass through the strait even while blocking other shipping, and Iran is reportedly weighing allowing cargoes traded in Chinese yuan to transit Hormuz — a move that would challenge the US dollar's dominance in global energy markets. China's strategic and commercial reserves total around 1.3 to 1.4 billion barrels, covering about four months of imports. Beijing has prepared, stockpiled, and now watches its rivals — both American allies and European partners — scramble.

The deeper, more lasting consequence of this conflict may not be the immediate price spike but the structural rewiring of global energy flows. At present, the eleven countries openly engaged in major global conflicts account for 51 percent of global crude oil production and 56 percent of global gas production — a concentration of output affected by conflict not seen in over eighty years. That number alone should terrify energy planners.

If South Pars and Ras Laffan are severely degraded, the world loses not a marginal supplier but a geological cornerstone — a field that, at full Qatari development, was on track to supply 20 percent of global LNG by 2030. The replacement of that volume from US LNG, Australian gas, or African fields would take five to ten years and hundreds of billions in capital. (IPA Service)

# Assam's redrawn political frontier

**By: Dipak Kurmi**

The political landscape of Assam has reached a fever pitch as the state prepares for the high-stakes Assembly elections scheduled for April 9, 2026. Following the intensive process of delimitation that fundamentally altered the boundaries and demographics of several constituencies, the major political players have finally unveiled their strategic blueprints through extensive candidate lists. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) took center stage on Thursday by announcing a comprehensive list of 88 candidates, signaling a bold strategy of organizational churn and tactical induction. This announcement followed a high-level meeting of the BJP Central Election Committee in New Delhi, a gathering that underscored the national importance of the Assam polls. Attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, and National President Nitin Nabin, the meeting served as the final crucible for a list that seeks to balance the incumbency of veterans with the energy of new faces, all while navigating the complexities of a newly partitioned electoral map.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, the undisputed architect of the BJP's regional dominance, will once again seek a mandate from his stronghold of Jalukbari. Sarma's connection to this constituency is storied, having represented the seat for five consecutive terms—thrice as a Congress member before his pivotal shift to the BJP in 2015. His performance in the 2021 elections set a daunting benchmark, where he secured a record victory with a margin exceeding one lakh votes. The Jalukbari seat, which bridges the divide between urban Gauhati and its rural fringes, remains a symbol of Sarma's broad-based appeal. On Friday, the Chief Minister is set to file his nomination papers at 12:30 PM, an event expected to serve as a massive show of strength for the NDA. Sarma has been vocal about the party's selection criteria, emphasizing that the 88 names announced—with one remaining for Sissiborgaon—reflect a meticulous blend of community representation, gender inclusivity, and youth empowerment.

A significant subplot of this election cycle is the BJP's aggressive induction of former Congress heavyweights, a move that has visibly rattled the opposition. The most prominent among these is Pradyut Bordoloi, a sitting Member of Parliament who resigned from Congress only a day prior to being handed a BJP ticket for the prestigious Dispur constituency. Bordoloi's entry led to the displacement of sitting MLA Atul Bora, a decision that has reportedly caused some internal friction within the local party ranks. Similarly, Bhupen Borah, another former Congress leader, has been fielded from Bihpuria, replacing Amiya Bhuyan. The ripple effects of these defections were felt immediately in the Congress camp, as Pradyut Bordoloi's son, Prateek Bordoloi, withdrew his own candidature from the Margherita constituency shortly after his father's shift. Chief Minister Sarma defended these high-profile inductions by highlighting the personal sacrifices made by leaders like Bordoloi, who abandoned a remaining three-and-a-half-year term in the Lok Sabha to join the saffron fold under what Sarma described as special circumstances.

In an effort to diversify its legislative profile, the BJP has nominated six women candidates in this round, a move the Chief Minister claims will double the party's female representation in the House. These candidates include Madhavi Das from Birsing-Jarua, Jyostna Kalita from Chamaria, Nilima Devi from Mangaldai, Ajanta Neog from Golaghat, Niso Terangpi from Dipu (ST), and Rupali Langthasa from Haflong (ST). The emphasis on Social Justice is also evident in the increased allocation for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes.

However, this push for new blood has come at the cost of several veterans. At least 15 sitting legislators were denied tickets, including prominent figures like former state president Siddhartha Bhattacharya in New Guwahati, Hemanga Thakuria in Palasbari, and Deputy Speaker Numal Momin in Bokajan. Sarma attributed these omissions largely to the constitutional requirements and shifts necessitated by the delimitation process, particularly in seats like Behali, which has now transitioned to a reserved category for SC candidates. The alliance dynamics of the North Eastern Democratic Alliance (NEDA) remain a crucial factor in the 2026 math. The BJP has finalized its seat-sharing arrangement by leaving 26 seats to the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and 11 to the Bodo People's Front (BPF). Furthermore, three members of the Rabha Hasong Joutha Sangram Samiti will contest under the BJP's lotus symbol, illustrating a strategy of co-opting smaller ethnic groups to build a formidable coalition. The AGP, the BJP's primary regional partner, also released its list of 26 candidates on Thursday, opting for a strategic mix of experienced hands and fresh faces. Party president Atul Bora will contest from Bokakhat, while senior leader Keshab Mahanta remains the choice for Koliabor. Notably, the AGP has made a concerted effort toward minority outreach, nominating 13 candidates from the minority community, a clear attempt to expand its influence in Lower Assam and the Barak Valley where local dynamics often dictate the final outcome.

The AGP's candidate list includes names such as Dipti Moyee Choudhury (Bongaigaon), Dipak Kumar Das (Barpeta), and Prithviraj Rabha (Tezpur), alongside a significant roster of minority candidates like Karim Uddin Borbhuyan in Sonai and Zabed Islam in Mankachar. However, the regional party was not without its own internal adjustments; five-time MLA and party veteran Ramendra Narayan Kalita was dropped from the Guwahati West seat, a casualty of the drastic changes brought about by the delimitation exercise. The AGP leadership maintains that their selection was governed by the twin pillars of winnability and organizational loyalty, ensuring that the party remains a potent force within the NDA framework. This internal balancing act is essential for the AGP as it seeks to maintain its relevance in an era where the BJP's influence continues to expand into traditionally regionalist territories. On the other side of the aisle, the Congress party is struggling to mount a cohesive challenge, releasing its third list of 22 candidates on Thursday. The list features a variety of names across the state's diverse landscape, including Aftab Uddin Mollah in Jaleswar, Jakir Hussain Sikdar in Pakabetbari, and Roselina Tirkey in Khumtai. Other candidates such as Manik Chandra Brahma in Kokrajhar and Sunil Chetry in Naduar represent the party's attempt to hold onto its dwindling ethnic and rural bases. The Congress strategy appears focused on consolidating the minority vote and capitalizing on local grievances, but the high-profile defections to the BJP have created a perception of a party in flux. The inclusion of names like Ashraful Islam Sheikh in Parbatjhora and Baby Begum in Dhubri shows a heavy reliance on traditional strongholds in the western part of the state, even as the party tries to re-establish its presence in the tea tribe belts through candidates like Sibanath Chetia in Makum.

Simultaneously, the smaller parties are positioning themselves to act as either kingmakers or spoilers. The United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) has released its third list, bringing its total nominee count to 16. Their latest picks include Pratibha Brahma for Baokhungri and Ranjit Basumatary for Sidli, focusing heavily on the Bodo heartland where they compete for influence with the BPF. Meanwhile, the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), led by Badruddin Ajmal, released its own third list of six candidates. This list includes Sheikh Shah Alam in Jaleswar and Ali Akbar Miah in Birsing Jarua, bringing their total announced candidates to 27. The AIUDF's presence remains a critical variable, particularly in constituencies where the minority vote is the deciding factor, often leading to three-way contests that historically benefit the BJP by splitting the opposition's base.

As the campaign prepares to enter its most intensive phase, the BJP has announced a massive rollout of star campaigners. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Amit Shah, and Nitin Nabin are expected to tour the state extensively to amplify the "Double Engine" growth narrative. The Chief Minister has dismissed concerns of a potential internal rebellion following the ticket distribution, asserting that while there might be one or two disgruntled individuals, the party remains a disciplined unit. He emphasized that leaders who were not accommodated, such as Siddhartha Bhattacharya and Atul Bora, are expected to work for the party's broader success. Regarding the total absence of incumbent MLAs from Karbi Anglong in the current list, Sarma clarified that their experience is being reserved for the upcoming autonomous council elections. With the stage set and the actors identified, Assam awaits an election that will not only determine its local governance but also serve as a barometer for the political trends of 2026. (the writer can be reached at dipakkurmiglpltd@gmail.com)

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# Is HR really there to help employees? What early career workers should know about it

By: Jason Walker

Early in your career, you'll probably hear this piece of advice: "If something goes wrong, go to HR." It sounds practical and reassuring, but that advice is missing some critical nuance.

A difficult lesson many people learn later — often through experience — is that HR is not primarily structured to advocate for individual employees. Instead, it's main function is to protect the organization it works for.

This can make people uncomfortable, but it's not meant as a criticism of the people who work in HR. Most HR professionals are thoughtful, well-meaning practitioners who care about fairness and employee well-being.

The issue is less about individuals and more about organizational structure. HR's main function is to manage organizational risk, which includes reducing legal exposure, ensuring compliance with regulatory bodies, hiring and firing employees, and managing internal issues.

Professional bodies reflect this framing. The Society for Human Resources Management, the largest professional HR body in the world, frames the role of HR landing squarely in compliance, workforce risk management and organizational effectiveness.

What these frameworks don't claim is that HR's primary mandate is to protect individual employees when their interests conflict with the organization.

When employee well-being and performance align with organizational goals, HR can be extremely helpful. But when those interests diverse, the organization's priorities typically comes first. Understanding this early is an important part of navigating your career.

No one's 20s and 30s look the same. You might be saving for a mortgage or just struggling to pay rent. You could be swiping dating apps, or trying to understand childcare. No matter your current challenges, our Quarter Life series has articles to share in the group chat, or just to remind you that you're not alone.

**HR is not a neutral party**

It's common for early-career professionals to assume that HR functions like a neutral mediator designed to resolve workplace disputes, but it's important to understand this isn't the case.

In practice, HR sits inside the corporate hierarchy. Human resources officers typically report to senior leadership, and their performance is measured by how effectively they are able to manage institutional risk.

Because of this structural position, HR professionals are responsible for balancing employee concerns with the organization's broader legal, financial and reputational risks.

**Two people sitting at a desk, having a conversation**

Early in your career, it helps to understand that HR's role is tied to protecting the organization, not acting as a neutral advocate for employees. (Getty Images/Unsplash+)

When conflicts involve routine interpersonal issues or policy misunderstandings, HR can intervene and resolve things quickly. But when complaints involve highly productive employees or senior leaders, the incentive can become more complicated.

Research shows that employees who generate revenue, prestige or hold influence may receive greater protection from leadership — even when their behaviour is harmful — because they are perceived as valuable organizational assets.

**Speaking up can carry risks**

In recent years, many organizations have promoted "speak-up" cultures, encouraging employees to report misconduct when it arises.

In principle, these initiatives reflect an important commitment to accountability. But the data tells a more complicated story.

According to the 2023 Global Ethics Survey, nearly half of employees who reported misconduct said they experienced some form of retaliation afterward.

Retaliation is not always explicit. It may take the form of declining career opportunities, exclusion from critical projects, damaged professional relationships or negative performance evaluations.

Even when retaliation is subtle or indirect, its effects can ripple through an organization. When colleagues observe retaliation from speaking up, they become less likely to report concerns. This creates a silencing effect where concerns about misconduct remain unreported despite formal reporting mechanisms.

Reporting misconduct is important, but it's wise to understand the potential risks and protections that exist before doing so.

**Internal investigations protect the institution**

Workplace investigations offer another example of HR's structural role. These investigations are formal processes HR conducts when allegations of misconduct, harassment or policy violations arise.

These investigations typically focus on determining whether internal policies or legal obligations were violated. In practice, that means the question often becomes, "Did someone violate policy?" rather than the more important question, "Was someone harmed?"

**Two people shake hands across a desk**

In organizations where leadership prioritizes ethical conduct, transparency and accountability, HR can still play a meaningful role in improving workplace culture. (Mina Rad/Unsplash)

HR professionals are often responsible for conducting these internal investigations. While many are experienced in employee relations, most have little to no formal investigative training. As a result, investigations are often conducted by professionals whose expertise lies primarily in HR management rather than formal investigative practice.

Research on corporate compliance systems suggests that internal compliance procedures typically serve as mechanisms to ensure legal defensibility and reduce organizational liability, rather than to deliver justice to employees.

In other words, once a workplace issue becomes a formal investigation, the process is often shaped by legal and organizational risk considerations.

**HR can still be an ally**

None of this means HR professionals are your enemy in the workplace. In organizations where leadership prioritizes ethical conduct, psychological safety, accountability and fairness, HR can absolutely be an ally.

For instance, HR sets policies that define unacceptable behaviour, delivers training programs that explain those standards to employees and establishes reporting channels for complaints.

Still, even the most committed HR professionals operate within a structural mandate to protect their institution. Understanding this distinction can help you can approach workplace challenges with clear expectations.

If you need to raise concerns with HR, it can be helpful to document incidents carefully, understand your company's policies and know your rights as an employee. Recognize when external reporting channels may be required and familiarize yourself with those processes.

Wherever possible, try to resolve problems early before they become formal HR issues. Once a matter enters HR channels, the focus frequently shifts toward documenting the issue and managing potential legal or organizational risk.

Once you understand how organizations actually work, you can stop navigating your career with assumptions and start navigating it more strategically. ***(Courtesy: The Conversation)***

## Apex Bank Assistant Recruitment 2026 – 150 Posts, Online Apply

Last Date: 19/04/2026.

The Assam Co-Operative Apex Bank Limited has released an employment notification for the recruitment of 150 Assistant Posts in the Bank. Minimum educational qualification for this post is Graduate in any discipline and last date submission of application is 19th April 2026.
Interested and eligible candidates may apply online here.
Name of post: Assistant
No of posts: 150 posts
Pay:Rs. 18730/- to 68040/- + GP: Rs. 4400/- along with other admissible allowances
Age Limit: Age of the candidates must be between 21 to 38 years as on 1st January 2026.
Educational Qualification: Candidates must be a Graduate in any discipline from a recognized university with minimum 45% marks and good knowledge of computer.
A candidate mandatorily has to submit a Computer proficiency certificate while applying.
Nationality: The applicant must be Indian National.
Local language proficiency: The candidates must be well conversant with the local language.
Application Fee: While applying for Assistant posts under Assam Co-Operative Apex Bank Limited, a candidate has to pay an application fee of Rs 750/-. The mode of payment of application fee is online only.
Interested and eligible candidates may submit their online applications here for these posts by following below mentioned steps.
# Scroll down, go to Important Web-Links section.
# Click on the "Online Application Form" and complete the registration process.
# In the next stage, click on "Online Application Form" Link and Login.
# Fill your all personal and educational details and upload necessary documents.
# Make payment of application fee as per your category and submit the form.
# Starting date of submission of application: 20th March 2026
# Last date of submission of application: 19th April 2026
Selection process will comprise of written examination and personal interview.
Although no syllabus is circulated along with the official notification yet; we hereby enlisted the syllabus for the recruitment process of 2024 for the same post to get a basic idea about the written exam. However, candidates are strictly advised to wait for the official notification in this regard.
Name of exam: Written exam
Exam date: To be updated
Total marks: 100 marks
Total no. of questions: 100 nos.
Medium of exam: English
Duration of exam: 100 Minutes
Negative marking: Not mentioned

| Sl No | Subject | No of questions |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | General/ Financial Awareness | 20 |
| 2 | General English/ English Language | 20 |
| 3 | Reasoning Ability/ Computer Aptitude | 30 |
| 4 | Numerical Ability | 30 |

## Gauhati High Court Recruitment 2026 – 3 Law Clerk Posts, Online Apply

Last Date: 05/04/2026.

Gauhati High Court has released an employment notification for the recruitment of 3 Law Clerk Posts in the Principal Seat of the Gauhati High Court for temporary engagement. Interested and eligible candidates may apply online here.
Name of post: Law Clerk
No of posts: 3 posts
Pay: Rs 30000/- per month
Educational Qualification:
a) Candidate must be a Graduate/ Post Graduate in Law or Doctorate in Law from any recognized University in India.
b) Candidate practicing at the Bar or having professional experience or literary works in Law to their credit would get preference.
Citizenship: Candidates must be a citizen of India as defined under Article 5 and 6 of the Constitution of India.
Age Limit: Candidate's age must be maximum 40 years as on last date of application.
Age Relaxation: Category-wise age relaxation is as mentioned below.
# OBC: 3 years
# SC: 5 years
# STP/ STH: 5 years
Employment Exchange Registration: Must possess a valid Registration number of Employment Exchange for the State of Assam.
Official Language Proficiency: The candidate should have knowledge of the Official Language of the State of Assam (Assamese).
Candidates have to pay the application as mentioned below according to their caste:

| Category | Application Fee |
|---|---|
| SC/ST (P)/ ST (H) | Rs.250/- |
| PwBD | Nil |
| UR/ OBC | Rs.500/- |

## Sachika Hotel Guwahati Recruitment – 5 Posts, Online Apply

Sachika Hotel, Guwahati, one of the most luxurious Hotels in Guwahati has released an employment notification for the recruitment of 5 posts. Interested and eligible candidates may apply online here.
1. Guest Service Associate (GSA)
No of posts: 02 (male/female both can apply)
Department: F&B service
Pay: Rs. 11000 to 15000 per month
Age Limit: 18+ years
Educational Qualification: HSLC pass or above or any Hospitality diploma
Working Experience: Minimum 2 Years in same background
2. Captain (F&B Service)
No of posts: 01 (male/female both can apply)
Department: F&B service
Pay: Rs. 15000 to 18000 per month
Age Limit: 18+ years
Educational Qualification: HSLC pass or above or any Hospitality diploma
Working Experience: Minimum 4 Years in same background
3. Security Guard
Department: Security
No of posts: 01 (only male)
Pay: Rs. 10000 to 11000 per month
Age Limit: 18+ years
Educational Qualification: 10th Pass
Working Experience: Minimum 2 Years in same background
4. Bakery Chef
No of posts: 01 (male/female both can applied)
Department: F&B production
Pay: Rs. 16000 to 20000 K per month (Based on Experience)
Age Limit: 18+ years
Educational Qualification: Diploma (Preferred)
Working Experience: Minimum 4 Years in same background
Benefits: Food & accommodation
Job Type: Full-time
Application fee: Nil .
Interested and eligible candidates may send their CV at office@sachikahotels.com
.Last date of submission of application: Immediate.
Sachika Hotel stands among the most luxurious Hotels in Guwahati near airport surrounded by modern features and a melange of results designed thoughtfully to create a perfect place for your comfort and stay. We aim to provide a new generation of travelers with a creative and contemporary hospitality experience that matches the requirements of leisure and corporate travel lifestyle.
Location: NH 31, Opp: Vandya International School, Amingaon, Guwahati, Assam 781039.

## St. Anthony's SS School Gossaigaon Recruitment – 11 PGT Posts

Last Date: 04/04/2026.

St. Anthony's Senior Secondary School, Gossaigaon has released an employment notification for the recruitment of 11 PGT posts. Interested and eligible candidates may apply online here.
Name of post: PGT
No of posts: 11 posts [: 01 (One) post for each below mentioned subjects]
Name of subjects: Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, Botany, Zoology, Computer Science (with AI Specialization), Economics, Education, Political Science, History, Logic & Philosophy
Pay: Based on experience and skills.
Age Limit: No age bar.
Educational Qualification:
PGT - Computer Science (AI Specialization): B. Tech (CS/IT), MCA, or M.Sc. with AI Specialization & others from same field may also apply.
PGT - Other subjects: Post Graduation in the relevant subject along with B.Ed.
Application fee if any: Not applicable
Interested and eligible candidates are requested to email their resume [mandatory] along with supporting documents/certificates/marksheets to:
✉ info@stanthonysgossaigaon.org
Applicants must ensure that:
• All marksheets & certificate mentioned in the biodata are scanned and arranged in chronological order. These will be verified during the interview.
• All documents (biodata, marksheets, and certificates) are compiled into a single PDF file for easy processing and sorting.
Note: For any queries, kindly contact: 8761906426 / 6000349462
Important Instructions:
• Incomplete applications or missing credentials will be rejected.
• No phone calls should be made to the school authority for personal favour or references.
St. Anthony's Senior Secondary School, Gossaigaon is a religious minority educational institution managed by the Diocese of Bongaigaon (Headquarters), following the principles and methods of Catholic schools worldwide.
The school follows the ASSEB curriculum and is affiliated with and recognized by the Assam State School Education Board (ASSEB) Div I & Div II.
School Code: 17H0616
UDISE Code: 1801020410

## RRB ALP Recruitment 2026 – 11127 Assistant Loco Pilot Posts, Online Apply

Last Date: 14/06/2026.

Railway Recruitment Board (RRB), Ministry of Railways, Govt. of India has released an indicative employment notification for Centralized Employment Notification (CEN) 01/2026 for recruitment of 11127 Assistant Loco Pilot posts in various RRBs. The online application process for RRB ALP Vacancy 2026 will be started from 15th May 2026 to 14th June 2026.
Interested and eligible candidates may read the advertisement and apply online here.
Name of post: Assistant Loco Pilot (ALP)
No of posts: 11127 posts
No of posts under RRB Guwahati: To be updated
Pay scale: Level 02 of 7th CPC Pay Matrix with initial pay of Rs 19900/- plus other allowances as admissible.
Age Limit: Candidates age must be between 18 to 30 years as on 1st July 2026.
Age Relaxation: The relaxation of upper age limit for reserved categories are as follows:

| Category | Age Relaxation |
|---|---|
| OBC-NCL | 3 years |
| SC/ST | 5 years |

Educational Qualification:
A) Matriculation / SSLC plus ITI from recognised institutions of NCVT/SCVT in the trades of Fitter, Electrician, Instrument Mechanic, Millwright Maintenance Mechanic, Mechanic Radio & TV, Electronics Mechanic , Mechanic Motor Vehicle, Wireman, Tractor Mechanic, Armature and Coil Winder, Mechanic Diesel, Heat Engine, Turner, Machinist, Refrigeration and Air-conditioning Mechanic. OR
Matriculation / SSLC plus Course Completed Act Apprenticeship in the trades mentioned above. OR
B) 3 years Diploma in Mechanical / Electrical / Electronics / Automobile Engineering. OR
Combination of various streams of these Engineering disciplines from a recognised Institution in lieu of ITI. OR
Note: Degree in the Engineering disciplines as above will also be acceptable in lieu of Diploma in Engineering.
Physical and Medical Standard of the candidates for RRB Assistant Loco Pilot posts must be as mentioned below.

| Category | Requirement |
|---|---|
| Medical Standard | A1 |
| Physical Standard | Physically Fit in All Standards |
| Vision Standard | ¹₁ Distant Vision: 6/6, 6/6 Without glasses with fogging test (must not accept +2D) |
| | ¹₁ Near Vision: Sn: 0.6. 0.6 Without glasses |
| | ¹₁ Must Pass test for Color Vision, Binocular Vision, Field of Vision, Night Vision, Mesopic Vision, etc. |

Following helplines were released for the last notification i.e., CEN 01/2025 for any queries related to technical issues.
# Phone: 0172-565-3333 and 9592001188
# Email: rrbhelp@csc.gov.in
# Time: 10 AM to 5 PM
Application Fee: Candidates have to pay an application fee as mentioned below:

| Category | Fee |
|---|---|
| SC / ST / Ex-Serviceman / PWDs / Female / Transgender / Minorities / Economically backward class. (The fee for these categories shall be refunded after deducting bank charges as applicable, on appearing in First Stage CBT.) | Rs. 250 |
| Others | Rs. 500 |

Interested and eligible candidates may apply online for these posts by visiting the official portal of RRB. They may follow below mentioned steps.
# Scroll down, go to Important Web-Links section.
# Click on Online Application Form link.
# A new webpage will be opened.
# Enter all your personal and educational details as required.
# Upload your passport sized photograph and signature and other required documents.
# Pay the examination fee as per your category and at the end click on submit button.
# Don't forget to take a print of submitted application form.
# Starting date of submission of online application: 15th May 2026
# Last date of submission of online application: 14th June 2026.

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# Israel hits Tehran with airstrikes on Persian New Year

**DUBAI, March 20:** Israel pounded Tehran with airstrikes Friday as Iranians marked Nowruz, or the Persian New Year, in the midst of a war that has sent shock waves through the global economy and risked drawing Iran's Arab neighbors directly into the conflict.

Activists reported hearing strikes around Iran's capital. The attacks came a day after Israel pledged to refrain from more strikes on a key Iranian gas field and Iran intensified attacks on oil and natural gas facilities around the Gulf.

Heavy explosions shook Dubai early Friday as air defenses intercepted incoming fire over the city, where people were observing Eid al-Fitr, the end of the holy Muslim fasting month of Ramzan, and mosques made the day's first call to prayers.

Iran kept up its wave of attacks launched at Israel that have sent millions of people to shelters, with sirens sounding across a wide swath of the north, from Haifa to the Galilee to the border with Lebanon. It came after an intense day that saw more than a dozen missile launches on Thursday alone, according to Israel's military.

Global fuel supplies have been under intense pressure because of Iran's stranglehold on the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic waterway through which a fifth of the world's oil is transported.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said late Thursday that, at the request of President Donald Trump, Israel will hold off any further attacks on Iran's offshore South Pars gas field. Iranian strikes in retaliation have led to already elevated global energy prices further surging and spurred Gulf allies to call for Trump to rein in Netanyahu.

Since the US and Israel launched the war on Feb. 28, Iran's top leaders have been killed and the country's military capabilities have been severely degraded. Netanyahu said in a televised address that Iran no longer has the

ability to enrich uranium or make ballistic missiles, although he did not provide evidence.

Still, Iran — now led by the son of the supreme leader killed in the war's opening salvo — remains capable of missile and drone attacks.

Brent crude oil, the international standard, briefly surged above $119 a barrel, up more than 60% since the war started. The European benchmark for natural gas prices also rose sharply and has roughly doubled in the past month.

**UN Security Council meets over Iran's attacks on Gulf states:** The United Nations Security Council held an urgent closed meeting Thursday during which Gulf countries stressed the need for Iran to halt attacks on them, said Bahrain's U.N. Ambassador Jamal Alrowaiei, the Arab representative on the UN's most powerful body.

But Iran has showed no signs of backing down. Saudi Arabia said its SAMREF refinery in the Red Sea port city of Yanbu was hit. Saudi Arabia had begun pumping large volumes of oil west toward the Red Sea to avoid the Strait of Hormuz.

Qatar, a key source of natural gas for world markets, said Iranian missiles that caused extensive damage to the Ras Laffan liquefied natural gas facility, reduced its exports by about 17 percent and will cost about $20 billion in lost revenue a year. The damage will take up to five years to repair, even though production at the facility had already been halted after earlier attacks.

Two oil refineries in Kuwait and gas operations in Abu Dhabi also were targeted by Iran, authorities said.

Underscoring the danger to ships in the region, a vessel was set ablaze Thursday off the United Arab Emirates' coast and another was damaged off Qatar. Efforts to bypass the strait were also under pressure: An Iranian drone hit a Saudi refinery on the Red Sea, which the country had hoped to use as an alternative route.

Meanwhile, the UAE said Friday it disrupted what it called "a terrorist network funded and operated by Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iran," arresting its operatives. It accused the men of laundering money while "operating within the country under a fictitious commercial cover" that sought to carry out schemes that would threaten the country's financial stability.

It published images of five prisoners on its state-run WAM news agency, without identifying the men.

**Netanyahu says Iran's military has been severely hit:** At Thursday's news conference, Netanyahu said: "Iran's air defenses have been rendered useless, their navy is lying at the bottom of the sea. ... Their air force is nearly destroyed."

He said he hopes the Iranian people will rise up against the Islamic Republic that has ruled for nearly a half-century. There's been no sign of any organized opposition since the war began, after Iranian authorities crushed mass protests in January.

The prime minister's comments to foreign journalists came amid difficult days for Trump and Netanyahu, with a top US intelligence official resigning and claiming Israel pushed Trump into the war, and Israel's attacks on South Pars, which led to Iran's retaliatory strikes on the region's oil and gas fields.

"I misled no one," Netanyahu said. "And I didn't have to convince President Trump about the need to prevent Iran from developing its nuclear program."

Gen. Dan Caine, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that US forces were attacking deeper into Iranian territory, with warplanes hunting Iranian boats in the strait and dropping 5,000-pound bombs on underground weapons-storage facilities.

**Trump says he is not deploying troops to Iran:** Iran condemned Israel's attack on South Pars, the Iranian part of the world's largest gas field, located offshore in the Persian Gulf and owned jointly with Qatar.

With some 80% of power generated in Iran coming from natural gas, according to the International Energy Agency, the attack threatens the country's electricity supplies.

After Trump requested Israel not attack South Pars, he also warned on social media that if Iran continued striking Qatar, the US would "massively blow up the entirety" of the field.

Asked later about the possibility of US ground troops being deployed to Iran, Trump responded: "No. I'm not putting troops anywhere."

**Death toll climbs in third week of war:** More than 1,300 people in Iran have been killed during the war. Israeli strikes against the Iranian-backed Hezbollah militant group in Lebanon have displaced more than 1 million people, according to the Lebanese government, which says more than 1,000 people have been killed. Israel says it has killed more than 500 Hezbollah militants.

In Israel, 15 people have been killed by Iranian missile fire. Four people were also killed in the occupied West Bank by an Iranian missile strike overnight.

At least 13 US military members have been killed. (AP)

# Japan's Takaichi tries to reaffirm alliance with Trump as he seeks help securing Strait of Hormuz

**WASHINGTON, March 20:** Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi has sought to reaffirm her alliance with President Donald Trump after the president this week seemed to complain that Japan was among the nations that did not quickly join his call to help protect the Strait of Hormuz.

Takaichi, who met with Trump at the White House, told the Republican president that Japan has opposed Iran's development of its nuclear programme and appealed to his desire to be seen as a peacemaker, despite his launching a war of choice with Iran. She told the US president through an interpreter that in the Middle East and around the world now, there was "a very severe security environment," but said, "Even against that backdrop, I firmly believe that it is only you, Donald, who can achieve peace across the world."

The two leaders had warm words for each other, including Trump calling the prime minister a "popular, powerful woman," but there appeared to be some tension as they faced repeated questions from reporters about Japan's support for the Iran war.

As Trump fielded questions during the roughly 30-minute public appearance with the prime minister in the Oval Office before their closed-door meeting, Taikaichi could be seen checking her watch. And then Trump made a particularly uncomfortable remark -- invoking Japan's 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor -- when he was asked why the US didn't notify allies like Japan ahead of the strikes on Iran.

"We didn't tell anybody about it because we wanted surprise. Who knows better about surprise than Japan? Why didn't you tell me about Pearl Harbor, OK?" Trump joked.

As Trump said that, Takaichi's slight smile appeared to drop, and she raised her eyebrows.

But the pair were all smiles in the evening, as Trump hosted a dinner in the prime minister's office. "This is a spectacular woman, and it's an honor to have you at the White House," Trump said. Taikaichi referred to the leaders through an interpreter as "best buddies" before declaring, in English, "Japan is back."

Earlier Thursday, the leaders of five European countries and Japan issued a joint statement demanding that Iran stop attacks on the Strait of Hormuz that block commercial shipping, and said they are ready to contribute to "appropriate efforts" to ensure ships can pass safely through the strait, though it is not clear what that entails.

Trump told reporters that he and Takaichi would be discussing in their meeting Japan's level of support for the US in the Iran war, saying, "They are really stepping up to the plate." He did not offer details.

The president later said that much of the oil Japan relies on passes through the Strait of Hormuz and said, "so that's a big reason to step up. He also mentioned US spending in Japan and the number of troops it has stationed there.

"I expect Japan to step up, you know, because we have that kind of relationship," Trump said.

After her meeting with Trump, Takaichi told reporters that they agreed that ensuring the safety of the Strait of Hormuz was of the utmost importance, but she gave Trump a detailed explanation of the actions Japan can and cannot take under its law. (AP)

# Epstein's former attorney tells House panel he didn't know about abuse

**WASHINGTON, March 20:** Jeffrey Epstein's longtime personal attorney testified to a House committee that he was unaware of the late financier's sexual abuse of underage girls at the time it was happening, becoming the latest person connected to Epstein to take that stance.

Darren Indyke, who worked as Epstein's attorney for roughly two decades, told the House Oversight Committee in his opening statement that he "had had no knowledge whatsoever" of Epstein's abuse and would have quit working for him if he had known he was trafficking women and underage girls.

Other associates of Epstein, including his former accountant Richard Kahn, one of his largest clients Les Wexner, and former President Bill Clinton, have also told the committee in sworn depositions that they didn't know about Epstein's abuse.

Democrats on the committee aired their frustration during a break from Indyke's deposition, saying that the lawyer had taken a "defensive" posture in the face of questioning.

Indyke, along with Kahn, are executors of Epstein's estate, and lawmakers had hoped they would provide details about Epstein's abuse that would bring accountability. So far, though, lawmakers have struggled to uncover substantive details about the associates of Epstein, who died in 2019 in a New York jail cell while he faced charges for sex trafficking.

"As with all the other witnesses, they all claim they never had any knowledge before it became public that Mr Epstein was involved with women, doing anything inappropriately with young women," said Rep James Comer, the chair of the House Oversight Committee.

Comer, R-Ky, added that Indyke was asked why he had continued to work with Epstein following his 2008 guilty plea for soliciting prostitution from a minor. He said Indyke told lawmakers that Epstein convinced him it was a one-time mistake and he was remorseful. (PTI)

# Hungary threatens further anti-Ukraine measures

**BUDAPEST, March 20:** Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on Friday raised the prospect of further actions his government could take against Ukraine to force the resumption of Russian oil deliveries that have been stalled to Hungary and Slovakia since January.

Speaking to media in Brussels a day after he blocked a 90-billion euro (USD 104-billion) European Union loan to Ukraine, Orbán said he and his government have "a lot of cards in our hands" beyond holding up the financial aid Kyiv needs to equip its armed forces and keep its economy running. "We have other tools as well," he said. "Forty percent of Ukraine's electricity supply goes through Hungary, we haven't touched that yet. (The EU) constantly wants to introduce new sanctions (against Russia). That will require unanimity, and we will not give it." Tensions between Hungary and Ukraine have escalated in recent weeks into a bitter feud over Hungary's access to Russian oil through a pipeline that crosses Ukrainian territory.

Oil shipments through the Druzhba pipeline were interrupted after what Ukraine said was a Russian drone strike damaged the pipeline's infrastructure. Hungary's government has accused Ukraine of deliberately creating an "oil blockade" to hold up supplies of Russian crude, and has promised to block all EU measures to assist Kyiv until shipments resume. (AP)

# China welcomes Vikram Doraiswami's appointment as India's new envoy

**BEIJING, March 20:** China on Friday welcomed the appointment of veteran diplomat Vikram Doraiswami as the new Indian Ambassador, expressing hope that he will make a positive contribution to the sustained improvement of Sino-India ties.

Doraiswami, a 1992-batch Indian Foreign Service (IFS) officer, is currently serving as the Indian High Commissioner to the UK. The 56-year-old diplomat was appointed India's new envoy to China on Thursday. He will succeed Pradeep Kumar Rawat. He is expected to take up the new assignment shortly.

Reacting to Doraiswami's appointment, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian told a media briefing on Friday that diplomatic envoys are important bridges for friendly cooperation and relations between countries. China welcomes the appointment of the new Indian ambassador to China Vikram Doraiswami, stands ready to provide him with facilitation as he carries out his duty in China, and looks forward to his positive role in promoting the continuous improvement and growth of China-India ties, Lin said, while replying to a question.

"I noted that Ambassador Doraiswami has chosen a Chinese name for himself: Wei Jiameng," Lin said.

The loose translation of the name in Mandarin, according to Chinese scholars, is Wei, a common Chinese surname that phonetically matches "Vi" in Vikram. Long ago, Wei was a powerful state during the Warring States period in Chinese history.

"Jia" means "auspicious or praiseworthy", "Meng" means "alliance". Broadly meaning auspicious/praiseworthy ally, the scholars told PTI.

All put together, it can be said as "one who forms an excellent alliance", according to one Chinese scholar, which carries diplomatic significance in the present context of India-China relations.

Lin said China hopes that after assuming his duties, Doraiswami will make positive contributions to the sustained improvement and development of China-India ties.

Doraiswami's appointment evoked considerable interest in the Chinese official media and the Chinese strategic community.

A Mandarin speaker, he served both in Hong Kong and Beijing diplomatic missions in his early career as a diplomat. He served as Third Secretary in Hong Kong in his early career, where he earned an elective diploma in Chinese from the New Asia Yale-in-Asia Language School before moving to Beijing in September 1996 for a four-year tenure.

The Chinese official media has given a positive build-up to Doraiswami's appointment.

Global Times, part of the People's Daily publication group of the ruling Communist Party, has featured his appointment on the front page, with the headline 'India appoints seasoned "China hand" as next Ambassador'.

"The position of Ambassador to China is considered one of the most critical positions within India's diplomatic service… Doraiswami's stints working in China have endowed him with a more rational and comprehensive understanding of the country," Lin Minwang, deputy director of the Centre for South Asian Studies at Fudan University, told the Global Times.

Doraiswami is a heavyweight "China hand" among India's senior diplomats, possessing a profound understanding of China-India relations and China's national conditions, Qian Feng, director of the Research Department at Tsinghua University's National Strategy Institute, told the daily. (PTI)

# Norway's crown princess talks about her ties to Epstein for first time

**OSLO, March 20:** Norway's crown princess said she was manipulated and deceived by the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, and felt unsafe during a 2013 encounter with the American financier at his Palm Beach, Florida, mansion.

Mette-Marit is married to Crown Prince Haakon, the heir to the throne.

She and Haakon spoke Thursday to Norwegian broadcaster NRK in a 20-minute interview that occurred the same day the criminal trial against her son, Marius Borg Høiby, concluded.

Prosecutors have sought a prison sentence of seven years and seven months for the charges against Høiby, who denies the rape allegations. He is Mette-Marit's son from a previous relationship. A verdict is expected in early June.

Thursday's NRK interview did not contain any explosive revelations but marked the first time the royal couple has sat down with reporters to address the fallout over the crown princess' ties to Epstein. Their relationship has raised questions over her judgment, though she is not accused of any wrongdoing.

The interview was time-limited due to Mette-Marit's health; she has pulmonary fibrosis, which causes serious breathing problems.

Mette-Marit has previously apologised for the situation she put the royal family in. She first met the financier in 2011 and their contact continued into 2014. The Epstein files contained several hundred mentions of the crown princess, who said in 2019 she regretted having had contact with him.

Epstein killed himself in 2019 while awaiting trial on charges that he sexually abused underage girls at his homes in the US.

Mette-Marit told NRK she didn't know he was a sex offender and abuser, she only saw him interact with adults and never witnessed anything illegal.

She also told NRK she feels a sense of guilt for Epstein's victims and has spent years processing their relationship and the allegations against him. She said she takes responsibility for not researching his background thoroughly.

The Epstein files include email exchanges between the two, and showed a relationship that some perceived as a close friendship. In one message, Mette-Marit wrote to Epstein, "you tickle my brain."

In October 2012, Epstein wrote that he was in Paris "on my wife hunt." Mette-Marit replied that Paris was "good for adultery" but "Scandis" were "better wife material."

In another set of messages, the emails showed that Mette-Marit borrowed an Epstein-owned property in Palm Beach, Florida, for several days in 2013. Mette-Marit said the stay was arranged through a mutual friend, and it was this visit that resulted in the encounter that left her feeling so unsafe she called Haakon at home.

She declined to elaborate during the NRK interview, but said she continued her contact with Epstein because she was gullible and had been manipulated. (AP)

# Zelenskyy sends delegation to US seeking resumption of Russia-Ukraine talks

**KYIV, March 20:** Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he sent an official delegation to the US in a bid to move forward suspended negotiations on ending Russia's invasion of his country. A senior Kremlin official also indicated Friday that a new round of US-brokered talks between Moscow and Kyiv will likely take place soon.

The trilateral talks, which have yet to produce any breakthrough on key issues, have been on ice while the Iran war has dominated international attention.

Zelenskyy is keen to restore momentum to the negotiations and said late Thursday that he had sent representatives to the US for a meeting expected Saturday. The White House did not confirm any meeting.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia won't be present at those talks. He said the time and venue for a new trilateral meeting haven't been agreed yet.

"The pause is temporary, we hope it's temporary regarding the continuation of the trilateral format," he said.

Western European officials have over the past year repeatedly accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of dragging his feet in negotiations while he tries to press his bigger army's battlefield initiative and capture more Ukrainian land. Russian forces hold nearly 20 per cent of Ukraine.

The latest conflict in the Middle East that began on February 28 with Israeli and US strikes on Iran has diverted international attention from Ukraine's plight.

At the same time, Russia is getting a financial windfall from a temporary US waiver on oil sanctions while Ukraine is desperately short of cash and still waiting for a 90-billion-euro (USD 103 billion) loan promised by the European Union.

Kyiv could also get fewer of the advanced air defence missiles it needs to fend off Russian aerial attacks as the Iran war burns through stockpiles.

Putin is widely expected to launch new offensives as the weather in Ukraine improves, piling further pressure on Kyiv.

Ukraine has become one of the world's leading producers of battle-tested drone interceptors, and Zelenskyy is hoping to provide expertise to Arab Gulf countries targeted by Iranian Shaheds in exchange for air defense missiles.

A team of senior Ukrainian officials has visited the Gulf region in recent days. (AP)

# *Navigational rights and freedoms of merchant and commercial vessels must be respected: India*

**LONDON, March 20:** Voicing deep concern over the evolving situation in West Asia, India has called for de-escalation through dialogue while asserting that the navigational rights and freedoms of merchant and commercial vessels must be respected in accordance with international law.

Addressing the 36th Extraordinary Session of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) Council here Wednesday, Indian High Commissioner to the UK Vikram Doraiswami also said that targeting commercial ships, endangering civilian crews and impeding safe and free navigation through international waters, including the Strait of Hormuz, are "unacceptable".

The extraordinary two-day session of the IMO Council discussed the impacts on shipping and seafarers of the situation in the Arabian Sea, the Sea of Oman and the Gulf region, particularly in and around the Strait of Hormuz, amid the US-Israel war against Iran.

"India remains deeply concerned about the evolving situation and continues to call for de-escalation through dialogue and diplomacy

with utmost restraint and priority being given to the safety of civilians," Doraiswami said.

"Targeting of commercial shipping and attacks on civilian maritime infrastructure is unacceptable. Such attacks have resulted in the loss of innocent lives, injuries and heightened risks, including to seafarers," he added.

At present, 24 Indian flag vessels are operating in the Persian Gulf region, including 22 vessels west of the Strait of Hormuz with 611 Indian seafarers on board, and two vessels east of the Strait of Hormuz, with 47 seafarers on board, the High Commissioner said.

"We reiterate that targeting commercial shipping, endangering civilian crews and impeding safe and free navigation through international waters, including the State farmers, are unacceptable," he said.

Doraiswami said the safety and welfare of seafarers, the security of international shipping, energy supply chains that sustain nations and humanitarian supply chains that ensure the survival and welfare of seafarers must remain paramount.

He conveyed India's deepest condolences to the families of seafarers injured or killed in the ongoing conflict in West Asia, and informed the IMO Council that of the seven fatalities mentioned by the Secretary General, three are Indian seafarers; four more are injured, and one is missing.

Doraiswami further said that India is among the top three seafarers supplying nations, contributing approximately 13 per cent of the global seafaring workforce.

"We remain deeply concerned about the safety and welfare of all seafarers. An estimated 23,000 Indian seafarers have been impacted by the current crisis," he said.

Elaborating on the government of India's "robust response mechanisms," the envoy said there is a 24/7 helpline for all seafarers, irrespective of nationality, and a quick response team set up by India's Director General of Shipping, apart from a dedicated control room by the Ministry of External Affairs to assist affected seafarers and their families.

Asserting that India has also strengthened maritime monitoring and preparedness measures, including through enhanced information sharing mechanisms, Doraiswami pointed out "with grave concern" the grave risk of marine pollution arising from attacks on commercial vessels in these waters.

He then pushed for the information network architecture and the role of India's Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region, which he said, "should be further promoted by its inclusion in the IMO MSC environmental monitoring and coordination with other significant information sharing centres."

IMO's Maritime Safety Committee (MSC) deals with all matters related to maritime safety and maritime security which fall within the scope of IMO.

The Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), hosted by the Indian Navy, was established by India in December 2018 to promote collaboration for maritime safety and security. Since its inception, the Centre has established 76 linkages in 28 countries. (PTI)

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## Sikkim Forest Department bans employees from creating reels during office hours

**GANGTOK, March 20:** The Sikkim Forest and Environment Department barred employees from creating reels or posting personal content on social media during working hours, according to an order issued on Friday.

As per the directive issued by PCCF-cum-Principal Secretary Pradeep Kumar, staff members have been instructed not to create or share personal social media content while on duty.

The move is aimed at maintaining professionalism and ensuring official time is devoted strictly to work-related responsibilities, the order said.

The department, however, clarified that digital content related to forestry, environment and wildlife awareness will be permitted if it is created strictly for official purposes.

Earlier, the Sikkim Police had issued a similar directive, restricting personnel from making reels while in uniform. *(PTI)*

*Emphasises effective implementation of schemes, focus on rural healthcare*

# Governor Yadav reviews health infrastructure in Nagaland

**HT Correspondent**

**DIMAPUR, March 20:** Newly appointed Nagaland Governor Nand Kishore Yadav reviewed the health infrastructure in the state during a meeting with officials of the health & family welfare department at the Naga Bhavan conference hall, Lok Bhavan in Kohima on Friday.

During the meeting, the department made a detailed PowerPoint presentation highlighting the state's socio-demographic profile, existing health infrastructure and key achievements in the health sector.

Officials informed the governor that Nagaland has made notable progress in improving major health indicators. They said the infant mortality rate has declined significantly, while the maternal mortality ratio and total fertility rate have also shown considerable improvement over the years, reflecting better maternal and child healthcare services in the state.

The officials also apprised the governor of the performance under the National TB Elimination Programme, including improvements in case detection and treatment outcomes. However, they noted that certain areas, such as timely disbursement under the Ni-Kshay Poshan Yojana and patient adoption, require further attention.

Appreciating the department's efforts to strengthen healthcare delivery and improve key indicators, Yadav emphasised the need for sustained focus on effective implementation of health programmes, particularly in remote and rural areas. He asked the department to continue its efforts towards ensuring accessible and quality healthcare for all citizens.

Secretary, Health & Family Welfare, S Tainiu, led the department during the meeting.

## Arunachal minister calls for fostering reading habits among students

**ITANAGAR, March 20:** Arunachal Pradesh Education Minister Pasang Dorjee Sona on Friday highlighted the state government's initiatives to promote new-age learning and encourage reading habits among students while inaugurating the Ziro Literary Festival at Saint Claret College (Autonomous) in Lower Subansiri district.

Appreciating the organisers for successfully hosting the festival every year, the minister said such literary engagements motivate students to cultivate reading habits and gain insights from accomplished professionals, an official statement said.

The two-day festival, held under the theme 'Celebrating Creativity for All,' was inaugurated in the presence of MLA Hage Appa, Lower Subansiri deputy commissioner Oli Perme and SP Keni Bagra.

Leading up to the festival, outcome-based workshops were conducted from March 17 to provide participants with hands-on creative exposure.

These included a videography workshop by Aditi Banerjee, a graphic novel workshop by Samudra Kajal Saikia, a poetry workshop by Subi Taba and a podcast workshop facilitated by Samyuktha Varma and Radhika Viswanathan.

The opening day featured a series of panel discussions. A session titled 'From Fireside to Frame: How Old Stories Find New Forms' brought together Moge Basar, Saikia and Tage Kanno, moderated by Moji Riba.

Another panel discussion on 'The Changing Landscape of Media: From Legacy Media to Influencer Culture to AI Content' was moderated by Karma Paljor and featured Viswanathan, Varma, Vinod K Jose and Vishal Langthasa as panellists.

An interactive discussion on 'Fear, Failure and Finding Your Voice' featured Sayantan Ghosh, Taba and Wulla Linggi, moderated by Ranju Dodum. The discussion also highlighted the underrepresentation of Northeast-authored books in mainstream publishing.

A creative workshop titled 'The Story Hidden in Ordinary Things' was also conducted by Langthasa.

The event also featured live musical performances, food stalls and exhibitions showcasing outcomes of the workshops, creating a vibrant cultural atmosphere. *(PTI)*

## Mizoram: Campaign gains momentum as parties gear up for Apr 21 civic body polls

**AIZAWL, March 20:** Political activity is gathering pace in Mizoram ahead of the Aizawl Municipal Corporation (AMC) elections, with parties stepping up preparations, finalising candidates and outlining agendas for the civic body.

Polling for the 19-member AMC is scheduled for April 21, with counting to be held on April 27.

The ruling Zoram People's Movement (ZPM) expressed confidence of victory, with party general secretary Eddie Zosangliana Colney saying the candidate list will be announced on March 23.

He said candidates have been selected after a rigorous process at the local council level.

"Our candidates have been chosen with great care from every ward," Colney said, adding that the party aims to transform the capital into a "New Aizawl" with improved urban governance.

Meanwhile, the opposition Mizo National Front (MNF) is seeking to retain control of the civic body.

MNF vice president and Dampa MLA R Lalthangliana said party candidates have been active on the ground since last year.

"As the party that founded the AMC, our goal is to retain power to ensure the corporation fulfils its original vision," he said.

He added that the party's organisational network, from headquarters to grassroots units has been fully mobilised for the polls.

The Congress, which is contesting all 19 seats, is projecting itself as a party of community leaders and promising a "people-centric" administration.

State Congress vice president R L Vala said the party aims to give the AMC a "new face".

The BJP said it would leverage its links with the Centre to boost urban development in Aizawl.

General secretary of the BJP's state unit, Delson Notlia, said the party's search committee has met multiple times to finalise candidates, with several names already sent to New Delhi for approval.

He said a BJP-led AMC would provide a "double-engine" advantage and help secure resources to address infrastructure challenges in the city.

The MNF has already released its full list of candidates, while the Congress has announced nominees for 13 of the 19 wards.

Polling for the urban body will be held across 19 wards from 7 AM to 5 PM on April 21.

Re-poll, if necessary, will be held on April 23.

The last date for filing nomination papers is March 25, while the nominees can withdraw their candidatures latest by March 30, officials said.

According to official data, there are over 2.39 lakh electors, including 1.26 lakh female voters.

In the last AMC polls held in February 2021, the MNF secured a majority with 11 seats, followed by the ZPM with six, and the Congress with two. *(PTI)*

## 2 mild earthquakes strike Sikkim, none hurt

**GANGTOK, March 20:** Two back-to-back earthquakes of magnitude 3.6 and 2.7 hit Sikkim's Gangtok in the early hours of Friday, officials said.

The magnitude 3.6 quake occurred at 4:26 am around 10.7 km northwest of Gangtok at a shallow depth of 5 km, while another struck 11.2 km west of the city at a depth of 10 km, the National Centre for Seismology said.

There were no reports of any injury or damage to property from any part of the Himalayan state, the officials said. *(PTI)*

## NSF demands cancellation of 109 'illegal appointments'

**HT Correspondent**

**DIMAPUR, March 20:** The Naga Students Federation (NSF) on Friday demanded termination of 'illegal appointments' in 109 posts in 16 Nagaland government departments within 45 days.

In a letter to the state chief secretary, the federation alleged that these appointments had been executed outside the purview of the Nagaland Staff Selection Board and the Nagaland Public Service Commission from 2018 to 2023, directly violating all procedural regulations for appointments through proper channels.

Referring to its letter dated April 10, 2025, to the state government, the NSF reminded that it had submitted the list of illegal appointees made across various departments without advertisement, undermining the principles of meritocracy, transparency and fairness in public service employment.

The NSF urged the chief secretary to take decisive and immediate action in the matter to not hinder the aspirations of thousands of educated, deserving Naga youth, who await fair opportunities in government employment.

The federation said it detected 32 illegal appointments in Nagaland state transport department, 11 in public health engineering department, seven in sericulture department, two in home guard & civil defense, three in food and civil supplies department, two in information & public relations department, four in urban development department, one in taxes department, three in industries and commerce department, three in forest, environment & climate change department, three in economics & statistics department, two in law and justice department, four in agriculture department, four in water resources department, 27 in Nagaland public works department and one in land record & survey department.

## Itanagar administration launches LPG helpline to curb hoarding

**ITANAGAR, March 20:** The Itanagar Capital Region administration launched a helpline to prevent hoarding, black marketing and price manipulation of LPG cylinders amid panic buying triggered by global supply chain disruptions, an official said on Friday.

Capital Region Deputy Commissioner Toko Babu said residents can report such irregularities through the helpline number, 9862024299, or by emailing complaints to icrdfcso@gmail.com

The identity of complainants will be kept strictly confidential, he said.

Earlier, on March 18, the administration had issued a notice on monitoring the supply of LPG and petroleum, oil and lubricants (POL) after reports that some consumers were booking excess cylinders, raising concerns about possible artificial scarcity in the capital region.

The administration has warned that strict action will be taken against those found involved in hoarding or black marketing of LPG cylinders. *(PTI)*

## KSU to protest over full Vande Mataram recitation in schools

**SHILLONG, March 20:** The Khasi Students' Union (KSU) has announced plans to stage protests at schools and government events where the full six stanzas of Vande Mataram are sung, arguing that the later verses invoke Hindu deities and represent a form of assimilation that goes against Khasi traditions.

Speaking at an event marking 48 years of the union, KSU general secretary Donald V Thabah recalled the detention of KSU members and said the organisation has consistently faced such challenges while working to protect indigenous identity. He added that many young members continue to carry forward the cause.

Thabah linked the issue to broader concerns, including past attempts to impose Hindi, the Citizenship Amendment Act and the Uniform Civil Code, stating that these measures undermine customary practices. He cautioned that if such directives are accepted, they could set a precedent for further impositions in the future.

He pointed out that only the first two stanzas of Vande Mataram refer to the land, while the remaining verses praise Hindu deities and urged members to report instances where the full song is performed so that protests can be organised.

The KSU reiterated its demand for stronger anti-influx laws and warned that future generations would judge the current response to these issues. Thabah also emphasised the union's long-term commitment, saying it would continue its efforts for generations to come to safeguard indigenous identity.

KSU president Lambokstarwell Marngnar, in his address, said the organisation was formed during times of crisis and remains committed to resisting what he described as external forces seeking to marginalise indigenous communities. He urged the youth to uphold unity and core principles.

Marngnar added that KSU members have historically faced imprisonment during campaigns related to boundary disputes, education and migration control. He described jail as a place that strengthens members' commitment to the cause of the indigenous community.

He also referred to past losses of leaders and members, attributing them to both government actions and the issue of illegal migration and warned that internal divisions could weaken the community. Marngnar appealed to the youth to remain steadfast and continue working towards the upliftment and protection of indigenous people.

The union reaffirmed its commitment to pressing its pending demands, including stronger anti-influx measures and said it would continue its work in defence of the indigenous community regardless of criticism. *(NNN)*

## Congress slams ZPM govt, alleges major rice procurement scandal

**AIZAWL, March 20:** Mizoram Pradesh Congress Committee (MPCC) president Lal Thanzara on Friday launched a scathing attack on the ruling Zoram People's Movement (ZPM), claiming that the public's high expectations for the government have turned into "widespread disappointment". Speaking at a party gathering held at the Congress Bhavan here, Lal Thanzara said that after two years in power, the ZPM has "failed" to live up to its seraphic and clean image. The Congress president alleged corruption regarding the state's rice supply chain.

He criticised the government's decision to increase rice prices, a move that impacts every household in the state, while simultaneously awarding supply tenders to a private firm he claimed was not the lowest bidder.

"Our leaders have been closely monitoring the rice supply process and have uncovered staggering irregularities," Lal Thanzara alleged.

He alleged that while 16-wheel trucks are capable of carrying 700 rice bags per trip, records allegedly showed that the private firm used to transport as few as 16 bags.

"These are clear indicators of potential corruption," the Congress president said, adding that the Val Upa Council, the ZPM's self-appointed watchdog, should be notified of these findings. *(PTI)*

## Thunderstorms likely in parts of Arunachal over next few days

**ITANAGAR, March 20:** Thunderstorms are likely in parts of Arunachal Pradesh over the next few days, according to the IMD.

West Kameng, Kamle, Lower Subansiri, Papum Pare, Namsai, Changlang, Tirap and Longding are likely to experience thunderstorms with lightning at isolated places on Saturday, it said.

Upper Subansiri and Lower Dibang Valley may also witness similar conditions, it added.

On Sunday, thunder rstorms with lightning are predicted in Lower Subansiri, Kamle, West Siang, Lower Siang, Lower Dibang Valley, Lohit, Tirap and Changlang.

On Monday, thunderstorm activity is likely to continue in parts of the state, particularly in West Kameng, Lower Subansiri, West Siang, Lower Siang, Lower Dibang Valley, Namsai, East Siang, Tirap, Changlang and Longding. Thunderstorms with lightning and heavy rain are very likely in Papum Pare, East Kameng, Kurung Kumey, Upper Siang and Tirap districts on Tuesday.

Heavy rain is also likely in West Siang and Siang districts, while thunderstorms with lightning may occur in Lower Subansiri, Lower Dibang Valley, Dibang Valley, Changlang and Longding. *(PTI)*

## Nagaland agri dept launches mega oil palm plantation drive

**HT Correspondent**

**DIMAPUR, March 20:** Nagaland agriculture department launched a mega oil palm plantation drive under the National Mission on Edible Oils-Oil Palm (NMEO-OP) 2025-26 at Doyapur in Chumoukedima on Friday. NMEO-OP is a centrally sponsored scheme launched in 2021, designed to achieve self-reliance in edible oils.

Its primary aim is to significantly increase domestic crude palm oil production and expand oil palm cultivation areas to reduce India's heavy reliance on expensive imports. Addressing the gathering, Dhansiripar SDO (Civil) Vejoyo Swuro said the initiative would generate employment opportunities for the public, urging the citizens to avail and benefit from such schemes.

Swuro assured that the district administration would extend all possible support to the farming community.

Delivering the keynote address, Chumoukedima district agriculture officer Moainla Pongen said the programme marked the beginning of an economic transformation for the region, with a focus on reducing India's dependency on imported palm oil. She pointed out that the country currently imports nearly 60% of its domestic requirement, resulting in significant annual expenditure, stating that the NMEO-OP seeks to address this gap by creating a self-sustaining ecosystem for production.

Pongen said the initiative in Nagaland will primarily cover eight districts, focusing on foothill areas suitable for oil palm cultivation.

Addressing concerns surrounding the crop, she clarified that oil palm is a viable and efficient option due to its better root system and comparatively lower water usage than crops like sugarcane.

She further assured that oil palm cultivation would be carried out in a sustainable manner, making use of wastelands while also promoting intercropping practices.

## *Arunachal's Namsai district tops in financial inclusion under NITI Aayog programme*

**ITANAGAR, March 20:** Namsai district in Arunachal Pradesh has secured the first rank in "financial inclusion and skill development" sector under the aspirational districts programme of NITI Aayog and has been awarded ₹ 3 crore in recognition of the achievement, Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein said on Friday.

Sharing the achievement in a post on X, Mein described it as "a moment of immense pride for Arunachal Pradesh", highlighting the district's progress under the national development initiative.

"Namsai district has secured the 1st rank in 'Financial Inclusion & Skill Development' sector under the Aspirational Districts Programme of NITI Aayog," the deputy chief minister said.

"In recognition of this outstanding achievement, the district has been awarded ₹ 3 crore," he added.

Mein, who represents the district, attributed the success to the collective efforts of the administration and the people of the district.

"This milestone reflects the tireless efforts of our administration, departmental officers, grassroots workers, and the resilient people of Namsai," he said.

Calling for continued dedication towards development, the deputy chief minister urged all stakeholders to keep striving for progress.

"Let us continue striving for excellence and transforming lives across every corner of our beautiful state," he said.

Officials said the aspirational districts programme, launched by NITI Aayog in 2018, aims to rapidly transform the country's most underdeveloped districts by focusing on key sectors such as health and nutrition, education, agriculture and water resources, financial inclusion and skill development and basic infrastructure.

The programme tracks district performance through real-time data and encourages competitive and cooperative federalism to accelerate socio-economic development.

Under the initiative, districts showing exceptional progress in specific sectors are provided performance-based incentives to further strengthen development interventions and improve service delivery at the grassroots level, they added. *(PTI)*

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*TMC makes 10 pledges in poll manifesto*

# 'Duare Chikitsa' camps, ₹ 500 hike in Lakshmir Bhandar

**KOLKATA, March 20:** The Trinamool Congress released its manifesto for the West Bengal polls on Friday, betting big on welfare politics and wooing its formidable women support base with 10 pledges that encompass widening the ambit of existing welfare schemes, stronger healthcare outreach and infrastructure development.

The 10 "pratigyas" (pledges) party supremo Mamata Banerjee announced while unveiling the poll document, includes a Rs 500 hike in the Lakshmir Bhandar scheme for women and the launch of healthcare camps in every block of the state.

Women voters constitute nearly half of the state's electorate and are widely seen as the backbone of the TMC's electoral success over the past decade.

The manifesto also places a strong emphasis on social welfare, healthcare access, youth support and agriculture.

The West Bengal chief minister, who is eyeing a fourth straight term, said the commitments would serve as a governance roadmap for the next five years once the TMC retains power in the state.

She said the pledges were aimed at ensuring "the wheels of development continue to move forward without interruption and the light of happiness reaches every household of my beloved Bengal".

At the heart of the manifesto is the expansion of the Lakshmir Bhandar scheme, one of the TMC government's flagship welfare initiatives for women that is credited with consolidating the party's women support base.

Under the revised benefit promised by the party, the monthly financial assistance will be increased by ₹ 500. Women from the general category will receive ₹ 1,500 per month, while those belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes communities will get ₹ 1,700 per month through direct transfers.

Underscoring that empowering women remains central to her government's political and social agenda, Banerjee said, "I am determined to make the mothers and sisters of Bengal self-reliant."

Political observers have often credited welfare schemes such as Lakshmir Bhandar for the TMC being able to build a support base among women voters who have played a decisive role in the party's victories in the 2021 assembly polls and subsequent local body elections.

The manifesto also promises the launch of doorstep delivery of healthcare services under 'Duare Chikitsa', under which the state government would organise health camps in each block and town every year.

"Healthcare services will reach the courtyard of every household. Through Duare Chikitsa camps in every block and town, people will have access to quality healthcare at their doorstep," Banerjee said.

Aiming to address the vexing issue of youth unemployment, the TMC chief said the government would continue financial assistance for jobless youth through the 'Banglar Yuva-Sathi' scheme, under which eligible beneficiaries will receive Rs 1,500 per month. Farmers' welfare too features prominently in the manifesto, with Banerjee promising a Rs 30,000 crore special agriculture budget to strengthen the state's farming ecosystem and support both farmers and landless cultivators.

Calling farmers the "annadata" (food providers) and the pride of Bengal, she said the initiative would boost rural livelihood and agricultural productivity.

The incumbent party also promised that every family in the state would have a pucca house and access to purified drinking water, reinforcing its focus on housing and basic infrastructure.

In the education sector, Banerjee pledged a major infrastructure overhaul for government schools under 'Banglar Shikshayatana' initiative to ensure better facilities and global-standard education for students.

On the economic front, the manifesto outlined plans to transform West Bengal into the commercial hub of eastern India by developing world-class logistics, ports and commercial infrastructure.

Banerjee said the TMC government would also work towards establishing a global trade centre in the state to attract investment and strengthen Bengal's position as a preferred destination for business and industry.

Senior citizens, too, figure in the party's welfare blueprint.

The chief minister said her government would ensure uninterrupted old-age pension support for existing beneficiaries while gradually expanding coverage to include all eligible elderly citizens.

For administrative reforms, the TMC pledged the creation of seven new districts and a broader geographical reorganisation aimed at increasing the number of municipalities across the state.

The TMC supremo said, "These 10 commitments will be the foundation of good governance for the next five years and will ensure that the momentum of development in Bengal continues..

The manifesto, heavy on welfare expansion and social security guarantees, signals the TMC's strategy of doubling down on its tried-and-tested model of social schemes and targeted benefits, particularly among women, as it prepares for what is expected to be an intensely fought 2026 assembly election in the state.

Elections to the 294-member West Bengal assembly will be held in two phases -- on April 23 and 29. Votes will be counted on May 4. (PTI)

# Mamata making 'desperate' claims ahead of elections, says Bengal BJP chief

**KOLKATA, March 20:** West Bengal BJP chief Samik Bhattacharya on Friday said Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's allegations that the saffron party is bringing in outsiders to foment trouble across the state reflect her "desperation" ahead of the assembly elections.

Addressing a press conference at the state BJP headquarters, the Rajya Sabha MP said, "Going by the logic put forward by the TMC supremo, it raises questions about the failure of police to keep vigil and monitor the entry of elements allegedly carrying arms and ammunition to create law and order problems."

"Actually, Mamata Banerjee, being a seasoned politician, knows her party will not be in power after the assembly polls. Hence, she is manufacturing this narrative and making provocative statements," he said.

Releasing the candidate list on March 17, Banerjee alleged that some officials from outside the state had been brought in to assist the BJP in the electoral process.

"They have brought in scores of people from outside the state to help the BJP. If you come across such outsiders in your locality, do inform," she had said while addressing her party workers.

Bhattacharya alleged that the TMC would blame the BJP and the Election Commission, "an independent body", if any incident takes place to suit its agenda.

He also alleged that TMC workers had attacked BJP workers and journalists in the past.

"When Mamata Banerjee makes such comments, she should explain how many FIRs were registered in cases of attacks on BJP workers and journalists, and how many of the accused were arrested. None," he said.

Asserting that the BJP-led Centre does not intend to topple any democratically elected government, Bhattacharya said, "We are not Congress. We do not have the DNA to topple a democratically elected government."

Responding to allegations by Banerjee and her party leaders that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had threatened action against TMC leaders, he said, "Modiji had said that those named in FIRs for attacks on BJP workers in the 2021 post-poll violence would be prosecuted as per law."

"We want to assure the chief minister that, unlike her party, the BJP does not believe in organised attacks on political opponents even after winning elections," he added.

Bhattacharya said the ₹ 1,500 monthly allowance to the educated unemployed youth under the Yuva Sathi scheme showed her failure to create job opportunities in Bengal.

He alleged that despite the Bengal Global Business Summit, investments were not coming to the state.

"Industrialists who attend the summit are not investing in Bengal, but are going to other states. Apart from routine PSU investments, there is no significant investment in the state," he said.

He further claimed that Bengal was among the leading states in cases of child marriage and school dropouts, which contradicted the state government's 'Egiye Bangla' slogan. He said while the TMC government lags behind other states in providing 100 per cent drinking water connection to every household, BJP will meet the target by 2026.

Bhattacharya said the death of a man due to the malfunctioning of an elevator in RG Kar Hospital shows "the agency, which got the contract to oversee maintenance of the elevator at the trauma care building, had failed to do its job properly."

The elections to the 294-member West Bengal assembly will be held in two phases - on April 23 and 29. Votes will be counted on May 4. (PTI)

# Man dies in Kolkata's RG Kar Hospital lift

**KOLKATA, March 20:** A man died allegedly after getting stuck in a lift of a state-run R G Kar hospital in north Kolkata on Friday, prompting BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari to term it "murder" and blame Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee for the incident.

While the BJP alleged that corruption in the state's healthcare system was the cause of the incident, Adhikari held CM Banerjee, who is in charge of the health department, Health Secretary Narayan Swaroop Nigam and the hospital superintendent responsible for the death. The leader of the opposition in the outgoing Assembly of the poll-bound West Bengal claimed the elevator at the R G Kar Medical College, where the man died, was under maintenance at the time.

"I have documents with me… they intentionally killed (the man) using a lift that was being repaired. A case of murder should be immediately registered in the matter," he told reporters while campaigning at Mahishadal in Purba Medinipur.

Besides contesting from his stronghold Nandigram, Adhikari is also pitted against Banerjee in Bhabanipur for the state polls.

The death, which has given new ammunition to the opposition party ahead of the polls, occurred when the victim had brought his four-year-old son for treatment at the R G Kar Medical College and Hospital. He got stuck in the elevator when it stopped functioning suddenly, the man's family claimed, adding that his wife was at the trauma care unit at the time. They also claimed that there was no operator at the elevator.

The man, in his early 40s, was bleeding from his nose when he was rescued and taken to the emergency unit, a senior hospital official said. "A post-mortem will ascertain the cause of the death," the official said. The hospital's patient welfare committee chairman, Atin Ghosh, who is also the deputy mayor of Kolkata, admitted that there may have been some lapses, owing to which the "unfortunate incident" took place. (PTI)

# Kerala can't remain reliant on remittances, lotteries, liquor: Tharoor

**NEW DELHI, March 20:** The LDF government in Kerala keeps the state reliant on remittances, lotteries, and liquor, a model that will not work anymore, Congress leader Shashi Tharoor has said, asserting that the UDF has plenty of new ideas for Kerala 2.0.

In an interview with PTI, Tharoor said the Congress-led UDF's plank for the upcoming polls in Kerala is much more positive than just the anti-incumbency element against the LDF's 10-year rule. He accused the Left Democratic Front dispensation of mismanagement, saying the state government runs out of salaries by September and has to borrow money to pay.

Asked whether the central plank of the Congress would be the anti-incumbency against the Pinarayi Vijayan government, Tharoor said, "No, I think our plank is much more positive. It is about Kerala 2.0." "Yes, there is an anti-incumbency element. One of our key campaign slogans is it's time for an accounting of everything that the government has done wrong.

"But in addition to that, there is a very positive message. For example, we delivered specific five guarantees from free travel for women in buses to improved pension payments, which is something that the Left front government has consistently failed to do," Tharoor told PTI.

The election for the 140-seat Kerala Assembly will be held on April 9. The MP from Thiruvananthapuram said that the party's manifesto

is yet to come out, but among the ideas that he has been advocating is to open up the environment to businesses in the state.

"We in Kerala cannot remain reliant on remittances, lotteries and liquor, which is essentially what is keeping the state going," he said.

"Do you know that we actually spent more money on debt servicing, interests on debts, and on salaries and pensions than we do on all of our development projects put together. It is a disgrace," he said, slamming the Left government's revenue model.

"This sort of stuff simply cannot do now, you need responsible management, but you can't do it by taxing your own people. You are already the most highly taxed people in India. Highest property tax, highest stamp duty, highest various state levies. What we need now is revenue to be generated by new businesses, new ventures," Tharoor asserted.

"I have lots of ideas, the Congress- UDF have a lot of ideas for new things we can do that have not been tried so far," he added.

Tharoor emphasised that the BJP will remain a marginal player, and the contest will primarily be between the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the United Democratic Front.

"It is not a triangular contest, for the BJP is a zero-seat party in the assembly. From zero, if they go to one or two or three, they will be extremely proud and happy, and they will congratulate themselves on a great win. That is the situation the BJP is in," he said.

"They (BJP) are not even likely to have a big enough footprint to be a kingmaker in the state. It is going to be between the LDF and the UDF, there are no doubts about that," the Congress MP said. In the 2021 state election, the incumbent LDF retained power with 99 seats, upping its last tally by eight more.

The election marked the first time an alliance won consecutive terms in the state since 1977.

The UDF won 41 seats, six fewer than before, although their vote share increased. The BJP drew a blank. The Congress declared its second list of 37 candidates for the Kerala polls late Thursday evening. It had declared its first list of 55 candidates two days ago. The last date for filing nominations for the Kerala polls is March 23. (PTI)

# Telangana presents ₹ 3.24 lakh cr budget for 2026-27, focus on infra, poll promises

**HYDERABAD, March 20:** The Telangana government on Friday presented a budget of ₹ 3.24 lakh crore for the year 2026-27, up by nearly ₹ 20,000 crore over the previous year, prioritising its flagship programmes such as Musi Riverfront beautification and Hyderabad Metrorail Phase 2 and 3, besides fulfilment of poll promises.

Presenting the budget in the assembly, Deputy Chief Minister Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka allocated Rs 50,713 crores to the Congress government's six poll 'guarantees', including 'Rythu Bharosa' investment support scheme for farmers (₹ 18,000 crores).

He also announced several new schemes, including a Rs five lakh life insurance cover for all 1.15 crore families in the state at an outlay of ₹ 4,000 crores, a midday meal scheme for Intermediate (11th and 12th classes) students with a proposed expenditure of ₹ 100 crore.

Vikramarka, who holds the finance portfolios, said the revenue expenditure was pegged at ₹ 2,34,406 crore, and capital expenditure at ₹ 47,267 crore.

The government granted ₹ 23,179 crore to the agriculture sector, followed by Energy at ₹ 21,285 crore. The minister proposed an allocation of ₹ 17,907 crore for the Municipal Administration and Urban Development Department and set aside ₹ 13,679 crore for the Medical and Health Department.

Under the 'Cheyutha' social security pensions scheme, two lakh new pensions would be sanctioned to eligible beneficiaries, and ₹ 14,861 crore has been set aside for this purpose.

The budget has proposed upgrading select government schools into Telangana Public Schools with modern infrastructure, trained teachers, digital facilities, and dedicated transport systems and Rs 500 crores was allocated for this initiative.

Each school will provide education from pre-primary to Class 12 for about 1,500 students.

Among other initiatives, the budget announced a cashless health protection scheme for employees, pensioners, and their dependent family members, covering approximately 23.51 lakh people.

For employee safety, a comprehensive accident insurance scheme was also announced. (PTI)

# Babri mosque emotion; Muslim assertion could reshape Bengal polls: Humayun Kabir

**KOLKATA, March 20:** Suspended TMC MLA Humayun Kabir believes the emotive issue of constructing a new Babri Masjid in Murshidabad at his behest, along with a growing sense of political assertion among Muslims, could influence the 2026 West Bengal assembly elections.

In an interview with PTI, Kabir, who has floated the Am Janata Unnayan Party (AJUP) ahead of the high-stakes polls, claimed that the next state government may, for the first time since Independence, see either a Muslim chief minister or a Muslim deputy chief minister. He said that his outfit would contest 182 seats in alliance with AIMIM and could emerge as a decisive player in government formation if the verdict produces a fractured mandate.

"If our party forms the government, then there will be a Muslim chief minister for the first time. But even if we do not form the government, we will bring such numbers that no government can be formed without us," Kabir said. "In that situation, I will demand the post of deputy chief minister. I am saying this clearly -- there will be a Muslim deputy chief minister in West Bengal after this election, if not a CM. You can take it from me in writing," he added.

Kabir, who was suspended from the TMC last year after a series of public disagreements with the party leadership, has in recent months drawn political attention with his proposal to construct a mosque in Murshidabad modelled on the demolished Babri Masjid of Ayodhya, a plan that has triggered sharp reactions from both the ruling party and the opposition.

The 62-year-old leader said the issue had struck an emotional chord among Muslim voters and could translate into electoral backing for his party.

"Babri Masjid is an emotion; I tried to apply balm on that wound of our community. For establishing the Babri Masjid, if 100 Muslims go to vote, 80 of them will vote for candidates of my party. Wait till May 4, all your questions will be answered," Kabir said.

The AJUP leader said his party would contest 182 seats across the state.

"We have started by announcing candidates from Murshidabad and Malda districts. The rest will be announced on March 22," he said. (PTI)

# *Women, minorities, tribals anchor TMC's poll manifesto push for fourth term*

**KOLKATA, March 20:** Betting on the social coalition that has powered Mamata Banerjee's political dominance over the past 15 years, the TMC's 2026 poll manifesto focuses on women, minorities and SC/ST communities in a calculated bid to blunt the BJP's challenge and secure a fourth straight term.

Unveiled with 10 "pratigyas" (pledges), the manifesto blends welfare expansion, minority outreach and targeted tribal initiatives- a political mix analysts say reflects the electoral arithmetic that has repeatedly delivered victories to the TMC since it ended the Left Front's 34-year rule in 2011.

At the centre of the document lies the Lakshmir Bhandar scheme- widely regarded as the ruling party's most politically potent welfare programme.

Banerjee announced a ₹ 500 hike in the scheme, taking the monthly assistance to ₹ 1,700 for SC/ST women and ₹1,500 for women in the general category.

The move is seen as a direct appeal to women voters, who constitute nearly half of West Bengal's electorate and have increasingly turned out in larger numbers than men. "The Lakshmir Bhandar hike is not just an economic decision- it is a political signal. Women voters have consistently stood by Mamata Banerjee, and the party wants to reinforce that trust," a TMC leader said. Beyond financial assistance, the manifesto promises to increase women's labour force participation from 44.7 per cent to 50 per cent in the next five years by expanding employment opportunities, strengthening self-help groups and increasing credit circulation in the SHG ecosystem. Other proposals include working women's hostels in every district under the Karmanjali scheme, enhanced recruitment of women personnel in police force and stronger safety mechanisms through the 'Rattirer Sathi' mobile application.

The manifesto also promises 'Pink Booths' run by women police officers at key intersections in Kolkata and all-women night patrol teams on major roads.

If women represent the emotional and welfare axis of the manifesto, the minority community forms its electoral arithmetic.

Muslims constitute nearly 30 per cent of the electorate. Concentrated in districts such as Murshidabad, Malda, South 24 Paraganas, and Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur, the community plays a decisive role in more than 114 assembly constituencies. The TMC had made a nearly clean sweep in these seats in 2021.

In the 2021 polls, the TMC won 20 of Murshidabad's 22 seats, eight of 12 in Malda and four of six in Uttar Dinajpur.

The manifesto's minority outreach includes promises to protect and utilise Waqf properties for community welfare, expand job-oriented courses at Aliah University and introduce soft-skill training in 27 industrial training institutes located in minority-dominated areas. The focus on Waqf properties comes against the backdrop of political turbulence surrounding the issue over the past year. Violent clashes during protests against the amended Waqf law in Murshidabad's Samserganj, Suti and Dhulian areas in April last year left at least three people dead.

At the time, Banerjee assured the Muslim community that her government would "not implement the new Act in West Bengal".

The controversy resurfaced recently after the state's Minority Affairs and Madrasah Education Department directed district magistrates to upload details of around 82,000 Waqf properties to the Centre's UMID portal by December 6.

Alongside women and minorities, the manifesto also seeks to consolidate support among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

In the 294-member assembly, 84 seats are reserved for these communities- 68 for Scheduled Castes and 16 for Scheduled Tribes- making them crucial battlegrounds between the TMC and the BJP.

The manifesto promises expansion of educational and livelihood opportunities through strengthened Yogyashree coaching, 100 per cent scholarship coverage for SC, ST and OBC students and expansion of SC-ST hostels in every block.

It also pledges to intensify efforts to secure ST status for Mahato community and Kisan Jatis, while strengthening Large Area Multi-Purpose Cooperative Societies (LAMPS) to support tribal self-help groups and improve financial inclusion.

The outreach to tribal and backward communities is politically significant given the intense contest between the TMC and the BJP in the western districts of Bankura, Purulia, Jhargram and parts of Paschim Medinipur.

In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the ruling party wrested back seats such as Bankura, Jhargram and Medinipur from the BJP, although the saffron party retained Purulia.

In the 2021 assembly polls, the TMC won 36 of the 68 SC-reserved seats and nine of the 16 ST seats, while the BJP secured 32 SC seats and seven ST seats.

For the BJP, which has been attempting to expand its base among welfare beneficiaries while consolidating Hindu votes, the TMC's social coalition presents a formidable electoral barrier. Political observers say the 2026 assembly contest may once again hinge on whether Banerjee succeeds in holding together this coalition.

"If Mamata Banerjee retains the women vote, minority support and makes inroads among SC-ST voters in the western belt, it becomes extremely difficult for the opposition to dislodge the TMC," a political analyst said. (PTI)

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# Patna University's historic Wheeler Senate House turns 100

**PATNA, March 20:** Patna University's historic Wheeler Senate House, the traditional venue of PU's convocation ceremonies, which also played host to Nobel Laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore in March 1936, turned 100 on Friday.

However, the landmark occasion passed like a blip in its centennial journey with no commemorative event scheduled to mark the milestone.

"Today is a holiday at Patna University. The Wheeler Senate House building is a pride of the university and the city, but no event is planned to be hosted in the Senate hall for today," a senior official of the 108-year-old university told PTI.

The charming senate house with Doric columns framing its entrance was inaugurated on March 20, 1926 by the then-governor of Bihar and Orissa province and Patna University chancellor Sir Henry Wheeler, and named after him.

It was built using a generous endowment from Raja Devaki Nandan Prashad Singh of Monghyr (now Munger in Bihar). Sir Henry Wheeler had laid its foundation stone on March 16, 1925, according to archival records.

"Before a large and distinguished gathering Sir Henry Wheeler inaugurated today the new building of the Wheeler Senate House presented to Patna University by Raja Devaki Nandan Prashad Singh of Monghyr," reads a report on the inauguration, published in a newspaper in March 1926.

An old marble plaque embedded on a wall in the entrance lobby area carries the inscription of the inauguration event.

After the opening ceremony, Singh hosted an "at home" for the guests. This iconic landmark in Patna has been a venue for many historic events since its opening. It traditionally hosted innumerable convocation ceremonies of PU before the function was moved out to a larger public auditorium, senate meetings, opening session of the Indian Science Congress in 1933, the All-India Oriental Conference in 1933, and the All-India Library Conference in 1940 and 1964.

Besides, several annual general meetings of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society (later Bihar Research Society) in the 1920s and 1930s, annual conferences of medical associations, among other key events, have been held at this capacious hall.

But, perhaps one event that lends it a different aura, is the felicitation of Tagore by a citizens' committee on March 17, 1936, during his two-day visit to Patna 90 years ago, as part of his north India tour in aid of Visva-Bharati.

The senate house, facing the Ashok Rajpath in Patna, is adjoined to the university office building, also erected in the early 1920s, when PU, established on October 1, 1917, moved to its current location after operating from various sites since its inception.

Gopal Chandra Singh (49), a staffer at PU, who has been working at the university office since 2002, says the PU buildings and the Wheeler Senate House stand as a symbol of a glorious chapter in Bihar's modern education history.

"There is also a concealed door in the wall facing the dais of the senate hall, which leads to the examination department of the university office and eventually to the VC Office on the first floor. It has not been used for a long time now," he told PTI. The senate hall, a prominent landmark, has enjoyed nearly an uninterrupted legacy in its 100-year journey.

However, in 2023 it was renamed 'Jayaprakash Narayan Anushad Bhawan' after socialist leader Jayaprakash Narayan.

Days before the 106th anniversary of the university, a new plaque was installed on the right side of the senate house's facade stating that it has been renamed after Jayaprakash Narayan, popularly known as 'JP'.

While its name was officially changed in 2023, 'Wheeler Senate House' (in English) embossed on top of the facade of the building wasn't removed until around the 108th anniversary of PU last year, when the old nomenclature on the frontage was erased and replaced with 'Jayaprakash Narayan Anushad Bhawan' (in Hindi) using metallic letter blocks. Many heritage lovers and some members of PU's alumni have criticised the renaming of the historic senate house, saying the move amounts to "erasing history".

The senate house building was refurbished a couple of years ago, for which a sum of ₹ 2.84 crore was sanctioned. However, a nearly two-km double-decker flyover cutting through the heart of Ashok Rajpath, and inaugurated in June 2025, has eclipsed its glorious facade from public view.

A few years ago, the pair of heritage gates of the Wheeler Senate House facing Ashok Rajpath, were replaced with new and tall gates -- christened 'Shatabdi Dwar' -- by the university administration to mark the centenary of PU. But, due to widening of the road to accomodate the double-decker flyover, they were again dismantled and rebuilt later with same design.

The then-Bihar Governor Rajendra Arlekar and Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on September 5, 2023 unveiled a plaque embedded on the left side of the facade of the senate house to commemorate the reopening of the renovated hall.

In his address on the occasion, Arlekar had suggested renaming the Wheeler Senate House, saying it was a colonial-era name. Citing Tagore's visit to the Wheeler Senate House in 1936, he had suggested that the hall could be named after the Nobel laureate. (PTI)

# Make life easier for taxpayers, use technology to check evasion: FM

**NEW DELHI, March 20:** Emphasising that taxpayers are not adversaries, Nirmala Sitharaman on Friday asked income tax officers to ease compliance for honest assessees while leveraging technology to crack down on wilful tax evasion.

Addressing the 'PRARAMBH 2026: Nationwide Awareness Campaign on the Income Tax Act, 2025', the minister also exuded confidence that the Income Tax Act, 2025, effective April 1, will certainly set the trend for making India a very tax-friendly country.

The multimedia campaign, spanning print, radio, television, outdoor, digital and social media, has been designed to build awareness about the key features of the new Act, which is set to come into effect from the beginning of the next financial year. "Make paying tax so easy that honesty becomes the natural choice. But those who are wilfully evading, those who are deliberately trying to get away, technology must catch them. If you are honest, the system will make your life easy, but if you evade, the system will find you. This message should go to the taxpayer," Sitharaman said.

Parliament, on August 12, 2025, passed a new Income Tax Bill to replace the six-decade-old Income Tax Act, 1961. It does not impose any new tax rate and only simplifies the language, which was required for understanding the complex Income Tax laws.

The Act has removed redundant provisions and archaic language and reduced the number of Sections from 819 in the Income Tax Act of 1961 to 536 and the number of chapters from 47 to 23.

The number of words had been reduced from 5.12 lakh to 2.6 lakh in the new Income Tax Bill, and for the first time, it introduces 39 new tables and 40 new formulas, replacing the dense text of the 1961 law to enhance clarity.

Sitharaman also asked tax officials to hold awareness sessions across India to educate people about the new tax laws in local languages. "I want to convey a message to the Income Tax Department. You're not just tax collectors. You're the face of the government's relationship with the taxpayer. Since you're the face of the government's relationship with the taxpayer, this new law gives you a clearer and leaner framework to make it simple, to make it simpler for people who want to understand it better," she said.

It must be administered with empathy, fairness and efficiency, she said, adding that it is expected that every officer internalise the spirit of this new law.

"The taxpayer is not your adversary. The taxpayer is your partner in nation-building. I want a new approach, a new mindset. I urge Income Tax Officers to treat this "PRARAMBH" as an opportunity to embrace this fresh mindset...the atmosphere should change, and one should feel comfortable coming to an IT officer," she said.

Recalling the song from Hindi film Hum Hindustani to emphasise change in mindset, she said, 'Chhodo Kal Ki Baatein, Kal Ki Baat Purani; Aao Milkar Likhenge Hum Income Tax Ki Nayi Kahani'.

Drawing a similarity, she said the film was released in 1960 when the old Income Tax Act was being framed. Stressing that the new law provides an opportunity to build trust, she urged the department to encourage less litigation.

"So, our underlying thought with a new Act should be that I trust the taxpayer. If I made it simple, there's no need for him to come to me. Everything runs digitally. I should have less temptation to take things to court. "So, I would think it is necessary to build trust, reduce the need for litigation, use technology to minimise human interface, but never lose that humane touch. That should be the new Income Tax Act 2025. Make taxpayers' lives easy," she said. Quoting Prime Minister Narendra Modi, she said, during the AI Summit, he spoke about M.A.N.A.V., a vision that he put forth to have a human-centric digital era.

M stands for Moral and Ethical Systems, A: Accountable Governance, N: National Sovereignty, A: Accessible and Inclusive AI, and V: Valid and Legitimate Systems.

"Income Tax Act, 2025 must be rooted in Moral and ethical systems. We need to strengthen and protect Fiscal National Sovereignty. And, of course, the reforms are not just data-driven; they are valid, legitimate systems that you're building in trust with the taxpayer," she said.

Sharing further details about the new law, she said the presumptive taxation scheme has been strengthened, which should provide a big relief to all the MSME units, because most often, they think it is complex, and therefore, they have to seek the assistance of a tax audit.

For home buyers, she said pre-construction interest on housing loans is now explicitly available for both self-occupied and let-out properties. Sharing her six expectations from the tax department, Sitharaman said implement the Samwad sessions with sincerity, respect the time and effort of taxpayers and reduce litigations aggressively. "Every case that goes to a tribunal or a court is a failure of our system...a black mark on all of us," the minister said.

Besides, she urged the department to proactively engage with the youth of this country, use technology to arrest evasion and lastly, don't let this new Act meet the same fate as the old one.

"The Income Tax Act of 1961 started as a reasonably simple one, but year after year, provision after provision, exemption after exemption, it kept growing until it became 5.12 lakh words. We have now replaced it, thankfully.

"Ensure that there are ways in which you are able to do some things without complex amendments coming into it. This should continue to remain simple. You have had stakeholders and Parliament being very convinced that excellent work has been done in getting this simpler version of the Income Tax Act..." (PTI)

# Punjab to add 100 Aam Aadmi Clinics this month, 400 more planned: CM Mann

**CHANDIGARH, March 20:** Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann on Friday listed several health sector initiatives his government has taken, announcing that 100 more 'Aam Aadmi Clinics' will become operational this month, with 400 more to follow.

Mann said previous governments had neglected the health sector, but it has been a key focus sector for the AAP government.

The CM, at a press conference here, said that tendering for medical colleges at Kapurthala and Hoshiarpur has been done.

"All formalities have been completed. For a medical college in Malerkotla, land has been purchased, and on Eid, I will visit Malerkotla and will gift it to the people," he said.

With his government completing four years in office this week, on Friday, Mann presented the four-year report card of the health sector, after earlier detailing the AAP government's work in agriculture and irrigation.

The Punjab CM said his government started Mukh Mantri Sehat Yojana under which cashless medical treatment of up to ₹ 10 lakh will be provided to every family.

About the Aam Aadmi Clinics, Mann said that 883 are operational, in which various kinds of tests and medicines are free, and 100 more will be dedicated on March 28 and 400 more clinics are being set up, he said.

The CM said the number of people visiting the OPD in the Aam Aadmi Clinics has crossed five crore, indicating people's trust in them.

About the Mukh Mantri Sehat Yojana, Mann said 25 lakh beneficiaries have been registered under the scheme so far and 1.60 lakh people have availed treatment.

To run the scheme smoothly, in the current fiscal, a provision of ₹ 1,200 crore has been kept while ₹2,000 crore has been earmarked for Mukh Mantri Sehat Yojna' for 2026-27, he said.

As against this, the Centre has earmarked ₹ 9,300 crore for the Ayushman Bharat scheme. For over three crore people in our state, we have provided ₹ 2,000 crore under the Mukh Mantri Sehat Yojana, he said.

Mann alleged that several conditions under the Ayushman Bharat scheme limit the number of beneficiaries. The chief minister was accompanied by state Health Minister Dr Balbir Singh.

The Punjab government scheme offers cashless treatment of up to Rs 10 lakh per family per annum, with no income cap, in the government and private hospitals empanelled across the state.

Raising concern over misinformation, Mann said, "Some anti-Punjab forces who don't want people to benefit from such facilities are spreading canards about this scheme. These misnomers are aimed at discouraging people from availing its benefits, which is unwarranted and undesirable."

He added that the Punjab Government has empanelled the majority of private hospitals under the scheme, with government-fixed rates for around 2,600 ailments and treatments. He noted, "Around 900 government and private hospitals in Punjab and Chandigarh have been empanelled. The scheme covers 2,356 medical and surgical procedures, including orthopaedics, general medicine, heart, lung, kidney diseases, cancer treatment, and more."

Mann said detailed brochures regarding the Mukh Mantri Sehat scheme will be available in Aam Aadmi Clinics soon. He claimed that 94 per cent of patients have expressed satisfaction with treatment at these clinics, calling it the country's best model.

Mann, whose government completed four years in office this week, said 948 general doctors and 627 specialist doctors have been recruited during the past four years. "The recruitment alone constitutes 35 per cent of the total strength of government doctors. Earlier, even medicines were not available in government hospitals," he said.

Mann gave details about several other initiatives taken by his government in the health sector. He said 22 critical care blocks are under construction, and each block has a 50-bed capacity.

The CM said the government has introduced first-of-its-kind artificial intelligence-enabled screening devices for early detection of breast cancer, cervical cancer, and refractive errors. (PTI)

# 'People have the right to criticise judgments,' says SC

**NEW DELHI, March 20:** The Supreme Court on Friday refused to entertain a plea seeking removal of a remark against its verdicts from NCERT's old class 8 Social Science textbook, saying that people have a right to criticise them.

The Centre, meanwhile, informed a bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and justices Joymalya Bagchi and Vipul M Pancholi that it had constituted an expert committee comprising two former apex court judges and an ex-attorney general to review the NCERT book with a chapter on corruption in the judiciary.

Solicitor General Tushar Mehta told the bench that the committee comprises senior advocate and former Attorney General KK Venugopal, former top court judge Justice Indu Malhotra, and former Supreme Court judge and current National Judicial Academy director Justice Aniruddha Bose, along with a vice chancellor.

"We have formed the committee to draft the chapter. Mr KK Venugopal will be a member of the committee. Justice Indu Malhotra will also be a part. We have also requested Justice Aniruddha Bose from the National Judicial Academy to be there," Mehta said.

The top court was hearing a petition by former NCERT member Pankaj Pushkar against a passage in an older class 8 textbook that read, "recent judgments tend to view the slum dweller as an encroacher in the city." The court refused to entertain the petition, observing that the judiciary should not be oversensitive about healthy criticism.

"It's a viewpoint about a judgment. That's a healthy criticism. Why the judiciary should be so oversensitive about that." (PTI)

# CBI questions Anil Ambani for second day in connection with 2,929-cr RCom case

**NEW DELHI, March 20:** The CBI on Friday questioned industrialist Anil Ambani for over six hours in connection with a ₹ 2,929-crore cheating case, registered against Reliance Communications Ltd and him on a complaint by the State Bank of India, officials said.

The second consecutive day, Ambani arrived at the agency headquarters at around 10 am in his grey sedan and left the office at around 5.15 pm, they said.

He was questioned on alleged fund diversion, misappropriation and other irregularities in the loan funds issued to the company by the bank, besides being confronted with several documents, they said.

On Thursday, a spokesperson for the businessman issued a statement, "The appearance is in furtherance to Mr Ambani's commitment to extend full cooperation in the matter with all agencies."

Even yesterday, the industrialist was questioned by the probe agency for nearly eight hours in connection with the same case. The CBI had booked Ambani in August last year for allegedly defrauding the SBI to the tune of ₹ 2,929 crore, officials said.

According to the SBI complaint, now part of the FIR, the company had an outstanding of over ₹ 40,000 crore to various lenders, with the public sector bank alone facing a loss of ₹ 2,929 crore, according to 2018 figures. The CBI booked Ambani and RCom for allegedly committing offences of criminal conspiracy, cheating and criminal breach of trust.

"It is alleged that the accused persons, in criminal conspiracy, misrepresented and got sanctioned credit facilities from SBI in favour of Reliance Communication Ltd," a CBI spokesperson said in a statement in August last year.

Ambani's spokesperson responded, "Anil D Ambani denies all allegations and charges, and will duly defend himself."

According to sources, the agency also searched the Ambani residence 'Sea Wind' at Cuffe Parade in Mumbai.

The complaint filed by SBI pertains to matters dating back more than 10 years, according to Ambani's spokesperson.

At that time, Ambani was a non-executive director of the company, with no involvement in the day-to-day management, a statement from his spokesperson then said. (PTI)

# PM Modi meets trustees of IGNCA, discusses upcoming Yuge Yugeen Bharat Museum

**NEW DELHI, March 19:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday met the trustees of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) and discussed about the upcoming Yuge Yugeen Bharat Museum, and emphasised that this project will transform the North Block and the South Block, once a centre of power, into a centre of culture.

He also discussed with them various aspects relating to further popularising India's diverse culture. Officials had earlier said that the upcoming Yuge Yugeen Bharat National Museum -- billed to be the largest museum in the world -- will have eight thematic segments telling the story of India spanning over 5,000 years.

The new museum, to be housed in the North Block and the South Block in the heart of the country's capital, will cover an area of 1.17 lakh sqm with 950 rooms spread over a basement and three storeys, they earlier said.

During the meeting, the prime minister and the IGNCA trustees also explored ways to bring more people into this journey, strengthen outreach through digital and grassroots initiatives. IGNCA is an autonomous institution which falls under the purview of the Ministry of Culture.

"Met Trustees of IGNCA and discussed various aspects relating to further popularising India's diverse culture," the prime minister said in a post on X.

"We also explored ways to bring more people into this journey, strengthen outreach through digital and grassroots initiatives and support artists and scholars in preserving and promoting our rich heritage," Modi said in the post. (PTI)

# *Destruction of wildlife habitat in protected area will attract offences, penalties: SC*

**NEW DELHI, March 20:** Taking serious note of the destruction of habitats of aquatic animals due to rampant illegal sand mining in the National Chambal Sanctuary, the Supreme Court on Friday said such destruction in a protected area would attract offences and penalties under various laws including the Wild Life (Protection) Act.

A bench of Justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta said officials of the concerned departments of states of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh would be held "vicariously liable" for aiding and abetting the destruction of precious habitat by allowing illegal sand mining to continue.

The National Chambal Sanctuary, also called the National Chambal Gharial Wildlife Sanctuary, is a 5,400 sq km tri-state protected area. Besides the endangered gharial (long-snouted crocodile), it is home to the red-crowned roof turtle and the endangered Ganges river dolphin.

Located on the Chambal river near the tripoint of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, the sanctuary was first declared a protected area in Madhya Pradesh in 1978 and now constitutes a long narrow eco-reserve co-administered by the three states. The top court was hearing a suo motu case titled 'In Re: Illegal sand mining in the National Chambal Sanctuary and threat to endangered aquatic wildlife'.

The bench issued notice to Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and others seeking their responses in the matter. It said the suo motu writ petition was registered based on certain news reports pertaining to rampant illegal sand mining destroying the habitats of protected species of gharial.

The bench noted that the news reports gave a vivid description of

the destruction of the habitat of various aquatic animals in addition to that of the gharial, and they also referred to the de-notification of around 732 hectares from the sanctuary by Rajasthan as part of a boundary rationalisation exercise.

It said detailed consideration of these aspects would be made after receiving the response from various state governments and their departments.

"For the present, we may observe that every act of destruction of wildlife habitat in a protected area would attract offences and penalties under the Wild Life (Protection) Act, the Environment (Protection) Act, the Forest (Conservation) Act, the Biological Diversity Act and the Indian Forest Act as well as other applicable statutes …," the bench said.

"The officials of the departments concerned, that is, forest, mining and water resources as well as the police authorities of the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, by their lethargy and inaction would be liable to be held vicariously liable for aiding and abetting the destruction of this precious habitat by allowing illegal sand mining to continue," the top court said. It said the bench would issue suitable and exhaustive directions once the responses of these state governments and the departments were received.

"The registry is directed to implead and issue notice to the state of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh through their principal secretaries… the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change through its secretary," the bench said. It said notice of these proceedings should also be issued to the Central Empowered Committee (CEC).

The top court, which appointed two advocates to assist it as amici curiae, posted the matter for hearing on April 2. On March 13, the apex court took suo motu cognisance of illegal sand mining in the National Chambal Sanctuary and threats to endangered aquatic wildlife. The bench had said even areas where the Madhya Pradesh chief minister had released gharials have come under illegal mining.

According to reports, Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav released 10 gharials into the Chambal river at the sanctuary in Morena in February last year. (PTI)

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# ‘Dhurandhar: The Revenge’ delivers record-breaking opening, earns ₹ 145 crore

Aditya Dhar’s “Dhurandhar 2”, starring Ranveer Singh as an undercover spy in Pakistan, has broken many records to deliver one of the biggest openings in Indian cinema with an estimated earning of over ₹ 100 crore on the first day of its release.

The film earned over ₹ 43 crore from paid previews on Wednesday, the highest ever for an Indian film, and ₹ 102.55 crore on its opening day on Thursday, bringing its total India earnings to around ₹ 145 crore, according to early estimates by trade tracking website Sacnilk.

The makers are expected to update the official figures later in the day but the film has already surpassed the opening day numbers of recent Hindi blockbusters — Shah Rukh Khan’s “Jawan” (₹ 75 crore) and “Pathaan” (₹ 57 crore) as well as horror-comedy “Stree 2” (₹ 54 crore).

The worldwide collection of the movie is expected to cross the figure of ₹ 200 crore given the buzz surrounding the release of the second part after the massive success of “Dhurandhar”.

“Dhurandhar: The Revenge” opened in cinemas on the back of record advance bookings — over 15 lakh tickets sold, including paid previews on Wednesday.

It is expected to surpass the success of the first “Dhurandhar”, which earned ₹ 1,300 crore worldwide after its December 2025 release.

Produced by Jyoti Deshpande and Lokesh Dhar, “Dhurandhar: The Revenge” features Ranveer Singh as Jaskirat Singh Rangi, a young man who transforms into covert operative Hamza Ali Mazari operating deep inside Pakistan.

The sequel charts Mazari’s rise in the Karachi underworld while tracing the origins of the man behind the cover.

Actors R Madhavan, Arjun Rampal, Sanjay Dutt, Sara Arjun and Rakesh Bedi also feature in the sequel, which released in Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam. (PTI)

# INDIA RELEASE OF ‘THE VOICE OF HIND RAJAB’ HELD UP DUE TO CERTIFICATION ISSUES, SAYS DISTRIBUTOR

The India release of Oscar-nominated film “The Voice of Hind Rajab”, based on the story of the five-year-old Palestinian girl killed by Israeli forces in 2024, is stuck in limbo as the distributor is still awaiting a censor certificate.

The movie, which was nominated in the best international film category at the 98th Academy Awards earlier this month, was acquired for release in India as well as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Afghanistan and Bangladesh by distributor Manoj Nandwana of Jai Viratra Entertainment Limited.

Nandwana said the film was screened before the Central Board of Film Certification recently and they didn’t find anything objectionable in it. The screening was held in late February when Prime Minister Narendra Modi was on a two-day state visit to Israel.

“The committee said it is a very sensitive film and we have good relations. The screening was held when PM Narendra Modi was in Israel.

“We cannot play the film here because of the India-Israel relationship... We had a screening with the censor board and as you know, if there is any cut, they suggest that. But this film has no violence, nudity or any political dialogues,” Nandwana told PTI.

According to Nandwana, the film has been sent to the revising committee but he does not have much hope.

“The film has been sent to the revising committee. I am not sure when it will be formed. The film will be outdated by then. There is no point in having false hope when they have given the basic reason that, according to them, the film is against Israel,” he added.

Nandwana said that when films are typically screened for the censor board, a list of suggested cuts is provided, but in this case there was no such communication, except for a verbal indication that the film was considered sensitive.

PTI reached out to the CBFC and its chairperson Prasoon Joshi for a comment but did not receive a response till the time of filing this report.

Written and directed by Tunisian filmmaker Kaouther Ben Hania, “The Voice of Hind Rajab” recounts the real story of Hind Rajab, who was fleeing Gaza City in January 2024 with her family when their car came under fire from Israeli forces.

The docudrama is told from the perspective of Palestinian Red Crescent volunteers, who stay engaged with the frightened child as she describes how all her cousins in the car were already dead and keeps pleading with the volunteers to not abandon her.

The film features the actual voice of Hind Rajab, who could not be rescued. Her body was found 12 days later alongside those of her relatives and two volunteers sent to bring her to safety.

Senior Congress leader Shashi Tharoor reacted to the film’s certification hurdles in a post on X, calling it “pretty disgraceful”.

“In a democracy, screening a film is a reflection of our society’s freedom of expression and has nothing to do with government to government relations. This practice of banning films or books because of the offence they might cause to foreign countries must stop immediately. It’s unworthy of a mature democracy. #HindRajab,” he wrote.

NCP (SP) leader Anish Gawande said the “ban” on “The Voice of Hind Rajab” in India is a “blot on our collective conscience”.

“Those who claim to uphold the values of Gandhi are parroting the policy of Goebbels. Will looking away, shutting our eyes, prevent us from being complicit in the horror unleashed in Gaza?” he posted on X.

“The Voice of Hind Rajab” had its world premiere in the main competition of the 82nd Venice International Film Festival in September 2025, where it won the Grand Jury Prize and received a 23-minute standing ovation. It also screened at the Toronto International Film Festival.

The film has some of the biggest names from the world of cinema on board as executive producers -- Hollywood stars Brad Pitt, Joaquin Phoenix, Rooney Mara, Oscar-winning filmmakers Alfonso Cuaron and Jonathan Glazer.

In an interview with PTI earlier this month, Hania said she felt compelled to make a film on Hind Rajab and take her voice to every corner of the world so that people cannot look away from what happened to her.

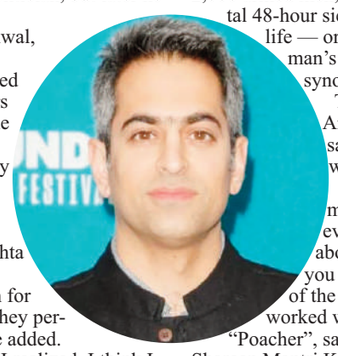
“It’s a story that we should remember and think about. In the stream of media and social media, it’s one small thing, a drop of water... I needed to take this voice out of this noise and to put it in a place where people can sit, take the time, have the attention, listen to her voice, remember and maybe do something,” she said.

“The Voice of Hind Rajab” is not the only internationally acclaimed film to have run into certification trouble with the CBFC.

British-Indian filmmaker Sandhya Suri’s 2024 movie “Santosh”, which was the UK’s official entry for the Best International Feature Film category at the 97th Academy Awards, after it failed to obtain a certificate from the CBFC.

The Hindi-language film, set in north India, follows a widow who joins the police force and investigates the murder of a Dalit girl. Despite no theatrical release in India, a planned streaming debut on Lionsgate Play in October 2025 also did not happen. (PTI)

# Filmmaker Richie Mehta to direct Amazon Original film on Phoolan Devi



Filmmaker Richie Mehta on Thursday said he was initially hesitant to direct a film on Phoolan Devi, the dreaded Chambal dacoit-turned-politician, but later he agreed.

“It happened when Kanwal, Kishore and Shareen approached me after I finished ‘Delhi Crime’, seven years ago. They had acquired the rights for the autobiography of Phoolan Devi. They said to me, ‘We think you’re the right person to tell this story.’ I said, ‘I think you’re wrong’,” Mehta said.

We went back and forth for five years about this and they persisted and said it’s you, he added.

“A year and a half ago, I realized, I think I know how to tell this in the context of the film. I pitched it to them and they said, ‘absolutely, let’s go’ and here we are,” he said.

“Phoolan: Trapped and outnumbered by 2,000 armed men, Phoolan Devi fights a brutal 48-hour siege that will either end her life — or rewrite the rules of a man’s world,” read the official synopsis.

The upcoming film is an Amazon Original and Mehta said he has great experience working the streamer.

“I’ve never felt in my life more empowered to express everything that’s in my heart about a subject. Because of you (Prime video) and because of the team here,” Mehta, who worked with the streamer on “Poacher”, said. It is produced by Mehta, Shareen Mantri Kedia, Kishor Arora, and Kanwal Kohli. (PTI)

# ‘Dhurandhar 2’ is meant to be experienced and celebrated: Mahesh Babu on Aditya Dhar’s film

Telugu star Mahesh Babu lauded Aditya Dhar’s latest directorial “Dhurandhar: The Revenge” and called it “an explosion executed with perfect precision”. Featuring Ranveer Singh in the lead role, the film released on Thursday and is a sequel to Dhar’s 2025 release “Dhurandhar”. The film also stars R Madhavan, Arjun Rampal, Sanjay Dutt, Sara Arjun and Rakesh Bedi, who are reprising their roles.

Mahesh shared a post on his X handle on Thursday as he praised the film and also lauded Madhavan for his performance and music composer Shashwat Sachdev.

“#DhurandharTheRevenge is an explosion executed with perfect precision!!!! The finest version of Ranveer unleashed and how… The way Aditya Dhar has conceived and delivered this standing ovation-worthy experience is remarkable,” he wrote in the caption.

“Special mention to Maddy’s performance and Shashwat Sachdev’s music.. This is a film meant to be experienced and celebrated…. Congratulations to the entire team,” he added.

Set in Lyari town of Karachi, an area known for its history of gang wars and violent turf battles, “Dhurandhar” revolved around covert intelligence operations against the backdrop of geopolitical and terror events like the Kandahar plane hijack, the 2001 Parliament Attack and the 26/11 Mumbai attacks. The sequel charts the rise of Ranveer Singh’s character Hamza Ali Mazari in the Karachi underworld while also delving into his origins as Jaskirat Singh Rangi, tracing the journey of the young man who eventually transforms into the covert operative. (PTI)

# Prime Video 2026 slate: Hrithik, Alia set up projects; ‘Dahaad 2’, ‘Panchayat 5’ announced

Streaming service Prime Video on Thursday announced a star-studded line-up including projects with actors Hrithik Roshan and Alia Bhatt, while critically-acclaimed shows like “Panchayat”, “Dahaad”, and “Farzi”, return with new seasons. Hrithik has joined hands with the streamer for two projects that he will produce under his banner HRX Films, a feature film, “Mess”, and a series, “Storm”.

“Mess” is directed by Rajesh A Krishnan of “Lootcase” fame and it also stars Ranvir Shorey, Gajraj Rao, Anurag Thakur, while “Storm” is helmed by Ajitpal Singh of “Tabbar” fame.

“I’m an actor and I’ve a fear of failure. Every instinct in my body tells me, ‘This is impossible’. But I push through that impossibility and out of that space HRX was born to inspire people who face impossible challenges in their lives, like I did.

“But I sit on producer’s chair with HRX Films with a different feeling. I sit solely and purely out of love, my irreplaceable, irrevocable and unconditional love for cinema. Here is where I truly feel the freedom,” Hrithik said at the Prime Video slate announcement press conference.

Alia is producing “Don’t be Shy”, a coming-of-age film, for Prime Video, under her banner Eternal Sunshine Productions.

“Ours is a small, passionate, and new production company, Eternal Sunshine Productions. Shaheen and I decided that we would like to give sunshine to the movies that the movies have given to us,” Alia said.

“Don’t be Shy’ is a film that we cannot wait for the audience to see. At Eternal Sunshine, we’ve always wanted to back stories that feel honest and voices that feel their own,” the actor said.

The team behind the much-anticipated film, “Mirzapur: The Movie” expressed enthusiasm and said they are thrilled to bring the story to the big screen.

The upcoming film is the cinematic extension of the favourite “Mirzapur” series, and it is directed by Gurmmeet Singh, who has previously helmed the series. It is written by Puneet Krishna.

“After three years of immersing ourselves in the world of ‘Mirzapur’ with such great characters, I think the moment that Puneet came with this idea (of making a film), it felt he opened the door to a new world,” Gurmmeet Singh said.

“It was amazing to be able to transport all these characters into a world with such a massive scale with sort of no holds bar where our imagination can take us where we want to go. Its amazing to share this with the audience on the big screen,” he said.

The film features Pankaj Tripathi, Ali Fazal, Divyendu, Abhishek Banerjee, Rasika Dugal, Shweta Tripathi, Shriya Pilgaonkar, Harshita Gaur, and others.

Pankaj Tripathi, who plays Kaleen bhaiya, said, “This is happening for the first time that a series has been transformed into a film, this is truly special.”

Amazon MGM Studios also announced five theatrical films, including Hindi film “Dilkashi” from acclaimed Malayalam filmmaker Lijo Jose Pellissery, Yami Gautam’s “Nayyi Navelli”, Kunal Kemmu’s “Vibe”, Rajkummar Rao’s “Raftaar” and Karan Johar’s home production movie “Kuku Ki Kundli”, starring Bhuvan Bam.

Kelly Day, Vice President of Prime Video and Amazon MGM Studios International said, “India is by far one of the most important markets for us anywhere around the world. It is one of our biggest Originals programmes anywhere in the world.”

“Dilkashi” is produced by Hansal Mehta and Sahil Saigal, and stars Abhay Verma of “Munjya” fame along with Zahan Kapoor.

The Prime Video slate also features compelling series including Konkona Sensharma and Jaydeep Sarkar’s upcoming directorial Hindi show, “Welcome to Khoya Mahal” featuring Aditi Rao Hydari and Barun Sobti, another series “Teen Kauwe” starring Bobby Deol, Siddhant Gupta, Pavail Gulati, Fatima Sana Shaikh and others, Nikkhil Advani’s magnum opus show, “The Revolutionaries” starring Bhuvan Bam, Rohit Saraf, Pratibha Ranta, and Gurfateh Pirzada.

“Matka King” starring Vijay Varma; “Raakh” with Ali Fazal, Sonali Bendre, and Aamir Bashir, “Rafoo” starring Maniesh Paul and Angira Dhar, “Lukkhe”, which marks the acting debut of rapper KING, Ravi Kishan and Aditya Rawal’s “Tax Department Story”, “Adarsh Baal Vidyalaya” a comedy series with Kay Kay Menon, Archana Puran Singh, and Deven Bhojani, and “Vansh – The Kalyug Warriors”, India’s first Hindi homegrown superhero series created for streaming.

New seasons of widely-loved series were also announced including “Panchayat 5”, and season two of shows like “Farzi”, “Call Me Bae”, “Dupahiya”, “Dahaad” and “The Traitors”, among others.

Films like Richie Mehta’s Amazon Original film, “Phoolan”, and Sanya Malhotra’s “Sundar Poonam”, director Ashiwny Iyer Tiwari’s “System” featuring Jyotika, Sonakshi Sinha, and Ashutosh Gowariker, Nimisha Sajayan’s “ASI Babita Reporting”, among others were also announced.

Two upcoming Hindi films, Kartik Aaryan’s “Naagzilla” and “VVAN - Force of the Forrest” starring Siddharth Malhotra will premiere on Prime Video after their theatrical run.

Shilangi Mukherji, Director & Head of SVOD Business, Prime Video India, said the slate marks a new era in delivering unparalleled content diversity.

“India remains central to Prime Video’s global growth, ranking among the top territories worldwide for attracting new Prime members in 2025. Close to two-thirds of our customers watch content in more than four languages, reflecting the growing appetite for diverse storytelling.

“Our Indian content is resonating globally among customers as well, over half of the most-watched Top 50 non-English titles in 2025 came from Prime Video India,” Mukherji said. (PTI)

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# Political tug of war over Iranian women's soccer team prompts criticism in Australia

**MELBOURNE, March 20:** The United States and Australia's political tug of war against Iran over the fates of seven members of the Iranian women's soccer squad appears to have ended with the depleted team returning home minus the two players who defected last week.

Critics now say politics trumped concern for the women's best interests as the drama played out. The evidence is that of seven Iranian women who initially accepted asylum in Australia, five changed their minds within days and returned to the team for reasons undisclosed.

**Refugee advocate says outcome far from ideal**

Critics argue the outcome might have been different had the women been provided with independent legal advice earlier and the process not been so rushed.

"We ended up with an outcome that is certainly far from ideal," said Graham Thom, advocacy coordinator for the Refugee Council of Australia, a non-profit umbrella organization representing asylum seekers.

"Hopefully the two who are remaining get the protection they need, but we just hope that those who have returned are also safe," he added.

Iran has claimed victory in the extraordinary public relations battle that played out since Immigration Minister Tony Burke released to the media on March 10 a photo of him posing with five women who had accepted protection visas.

He said the women, who all appeared without head coverings, were happy for their names and images to be released to the media.

Refugee advocates were alarmed, asking if women raised under an oppressive regime could be expected to question the Australian government's media strategy.

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

"Had these women quietly sought asylum without that publicity around them, it's possible that the Islamic Republic officials might have, as they have in the

cases of other Iranian sportspeople in the past who've defected ... simply allowed that to happen," Moore-Gilbert told Australian Broadcasting Corp. this week.

**Australia traditionally deals with asylum claims behind closed doors**

Australia has traditionally handled asylum negotiations behind closed doors, conscious that the public spotlight can ramp up pressure and bring dangers to potential refugees and their families.

Concerns for the team's welfare were raised when players decided against singing the Iranian national anthem before their first match of the Women's Asian Cup on the Gold Coast on March 2.

Iranian sports commentator Mohammad Reza Shahbazi calling the women "wartime traitors" in a television broadcast that was widely cited by protesters demanding asylum for the team.

The gesture attracted global attention and was not repeated at the women's next match, at which they sang the anthem.

Shahram Akbarzadeh, professor of Middle East politics at Deakin University in Geelong, suspects the team hadn't thought through the consequences of "expressing a political opinion" on the Iranian regime.

"Sometimes frustration overrides fear of consequences," Akbarzadeh said.

"Unfortunately for these players, their act of defiance turned into a symbol of resistance against the regime and basically a cause to be played by the United States and the Iranian diaspora who were anti-regime to humiliate and embarrass the regime and to basically gain a political score from the situation," he added.

**US president intervenes**

The stakes were raised when U.S. President Donald Trump used social media to call for the team to be granted asylum and telephoned Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese on the issue.

Albanese told the Trump that the first five, a four players and a team manager, had recently accepted offers of humanitarian visas.

Another two squad members chose to stay before the rest of the team flew from Sydney to Malaysia on March 10 after being knocked out of the competition.

"It quickly turned into a political dispute and political theater between Iran and the U.S. (and) Australia and of course the Iranians responded accordingly. They couldn't be seen to be as embarrassed by their failure," Akbarzadeh said.

All but two women who accepted asylum rejoined the team in Kuala Lumpur before the squad flew to Oman on Monday. Iranian state media reported they had returned to their homeland by bus from Turkey and were met with a welcome ceremony.

"We are so happy to be in Iran, because Iran is our homeland," midfielder Fatemeh Shaban told a flag-waving crowd. *(AP)*

# Hitaashee best Indian at Tied-8th, as Diksha is T-16 in Australia

**GOLD COAST, March 20:** Hitaashee Bakshi was the best Indian player on the second day as she moved to the top 10 at the Australian WPGA Championships after carding a 3-under 68 that placed her tied eighth, here Friday.

Diksha Dagar kept herself within top-20 despite a card of 1-over 72 following her first round 5-under 67. She is Tied-16th.

Also making the cut was Pranavi Urs (72-72) and was Tied-60th on the cutline. Vani Kapoor (73-72) missed the cut by one shot.

Diksha carded 1-over 72 to slip down from T-8. She began her round with a bogey on the first hole before making a birdie on the fourth.

She went on to make another two bogeys on the 11th and 16th holes as well as a birdie on the 15th. Her total score stands at 3-under par after two rounds. Diksha found all the fairways in her second round but failed to make the greens in regulation on seven occasions. All three bogeys came on holes where Dagar missed the green in regulation.

Pranavi Urs, having started off the ninth hole also managed to make the cut after carding a second round of 1-over 72 for the second day in a row and now has a total of 2-over par.

The cut for this week was set at two over par, a score that Pranavi just about managed to match due to two birdies late into her round on the fourth and sixth holes. She also had three bogeys in her second round. Pranavi is currently T-60.

Vani Kapoor failed to make cut despite improving her score compared to the first day. Kapoor carded 1-over 72 to follow her first round score of 2-over 73, her total score standing at 3-over par. She ended T-69.

Local star Hannah Green continued to show her fine form as she looks intent to seal her third title on the trot. The seven time LPGA winner carded 4-under 67 to become the sole leader heading into the weekend.

She is now two strokes ahead of her closest rival with a total score of 10-under par. Green had six birdies, one eagle, two bogeys and one double bogey in the second round.

Trailing her in the second place is Meghan Maclaren (66-68) at 8-under.

Hitaashee started her second round from the ninth hole, which is where the back nine begins at the Sanctuary Cove Golf and Country Club, with a bogey only to make her first birdie immediately on the 10th hole.

She would drop another shot on the 14th and bounce back with a birdie on the 16th. Three consecutive birdies on the third, fourth and fifth holes set her up for a 3-under par round for the day. Hitaashee has a total score of 5-under par after two rounds.

She is T-8 alongside last year's Order of Merit winner Shannon Tan, Morgane Metraux, Caley McGinty and Hannah Reeves.

Hitaashee had a good day off the Tee as she found the fairway on every single hole and only missed making the greens in regulation on four holes, including the third where she made birdie from off the green.

First day leader Kelsey Macdonald slipped way down the order to T-34 as she finished her second round with three consecutive double bogeys to drop down despite setting the course record on the first day.

Macdonald shot 77, a difference of 13 strokes from her first round. Her total now stands at 1-under par. *(PTI)*

# Spain makes light of failure to reschedule Finalissima vs Argentina with comedy sketch

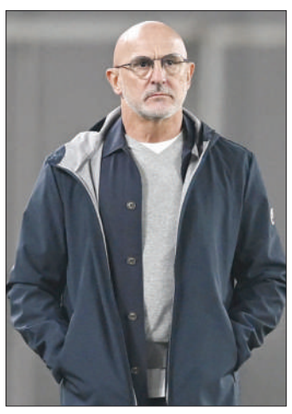
**BARCELONA, March 20:** Spain's soccer team has made light of its and Argentina's failure to find an alternative venue to play the canceled "Finalissima" match after the original site of Qatar was made untenable by the Iran war.

Instead of playing Argentina on March 27 in Doha, Spain quickly arranged to play Serbia on the same day back home in Villarreal.

A video posted on Friday on the Spanish team's X account includes a short sketch depicting a fictional Argentine couple bickering about the husband's apparently hairbrained idea to send an audio message to Spain coach Luis de la Fuente to ask him for tickets to see Spain vs. Serbia. The husband's plan pays off when the coach responds positively.

"Of course, count on the ticket, or rather tickets for you and your friends," De la Fuente tells the Argentine fan. "Although I would have liked to have seen you at a different game, I am sure this will be a great match as well."

The game between the European and South American champions was called off on Sunday because



of the widening of Iran's attacks on neighboring Arab states in retaliation to ongoing bombardments by the United States and Israel.

But the two teams and European and South American soccer officials were unable to agree on an alternative venue.

Upon its cancellation, the Spanish federation said that it and UEFA had tried "every possibility" to play the game, either at home or at another site, to no avail.

UEFA said all other feasible alternatives it explored "ultimately proved unacceptable to the Argentinian Football Association," including playing it in Madrid, where there is a large Argentine community.

The option of staging the event over two legs — one in Madrid on March 27, the other in Buenos Aires before the Euros and the Copa America in 2028 — was also rejected. Argentina had proposed to play the match later this year after the World Cup but Spain had no available dates.

South American soccer body CONMEBOL said in a statement on Sunday that Argentina's federation (AFA) received an offer from UEFA to play the match in Italy on March 27, but the defending World Cup and Copa America champion countered that the game take place on March 31.

It would have pitted Lionel Messi against Lamine Yamal in a showcase World Cup warmup.

Also on Friday, Spain announced that it will play Egypt in a friendly on March 31 in Barcelona. *(AP)*

# Ridhima grabs third title of season 2026

**NOIDA, March 20:** Ridhima Dilawari rallied from a bogey-bogey start to fire her third straight round of 71 and win the sixth leg of the Women's Pro Golf Tour here Friday.

Playing at the par-71 layout, Ridhima, starting the final round three shots behind Jasmine Shekar, was five behind after just two holes.

Ridhima then staged a superb recovery with two birdies and no bogeys for the rest of the 16 holes, while Jasmine carded a 4-over 75 that ended with a bogey.

Jasmine and Ridhima were tied at even par when they came to the 18th tee. Ridhima parred but Jasmine bogeyed giving Ridhima her third win in the last five events.

Ridhima won the second and the fourth legs and has now added the sixth leg as she continues to lead the Hero Order of Merit. For Jasmine, who won the first leg this season, this was her second straight second place finish.

Of the six legs that have been held so far, Ridhima has won three, while Jasmine and Tvesa Malik won once each and amateur Lavanya Gupta took the fifth leg.

While Ridhima had a smooth ride after a rough start, Jasmine had a roller coaster of a round. She began bogey-birdie and then bogeyed the fifth and double bogeyed the sixth.

A birdie on the ninth meant she turned in 2-over 38. On the back nine, she bogeyed the 13th and needed to par the 18th to force a play-off. She dropped a shot and dropped to second place at 1-over 214.

Saanvi Somu had the day's second-best card of 1-under 70 and rose to tied third place at 2-over 215 and was tied with Amandeep Drall (71). *(PTI)*

# Entering a soccer stadium without a ticket is now a criminal offence in Britain

**LONDON, March 20:** Entering a soccer match without a ticket will become a criminal offence under new laws that will take effect ahead of the English League Cup final between Arsenal and Manchester City at Wembley Stadium on Sunday.

It was at the national stadium where thousands of ticketless people forced their way in for the European Championship final in July 2021 in violent and chaotic scenes.

That led to a government review, which found that lives were endangered, sanctions on breaking into stadiums were weak and the practice of what the British call "tailgating" — walking closely behind ticket holders to get through entrances — should become a criminal offence.

Offenders across England and Wales will face a five-year soccer banning order, as well as a fine of up to 1,000 pounds ($1,340) starting this weekend, it was announced on Friday.

Sarah Jones, the government's policing minister, said it would be a "great deterrent."

"It cannot be right," she said, "that some people pay and some people don't and that people are put at risk, in danger, when people are tailgating."

There was previously no specific legal penalties for attending a soccer game without a ticket.

The Unauthorised Entry to Football Matches Act will also make it illegal to knowingly try to enter a match with forged tickets, passes and accreditation documents, as well as by pretending to be a member of stadium or playing staff. *(AP)*

# India women to play one-off Test, three ODIs in South Africa in December

**JOHANNESBURG, March 20:** The Indian women's team will play a one-off Test during its tour of South Africa later this year, which will also feature a three-match ODI series, Cricket South Africa (CSA) said on Friday.

CSA said the Test will be held in Gqeberha from December 20 to 23, while the ODIs are scheduled from December 9 to 15 across Potchefstroom, Bloemfontein and Cape Town.

"The Proteas will face India in a three-match ICC Women's Championship (IWC) ODI series from 09–15 December, with the JB Marks Oval in Potchefstroom hosting the series opener before Mangaung Oval in Bloemfontein and the Newlands Cricket Ground stage the second and third matches," CSA said in a statement.

"The tour will also include a one-off Test match at St George's Park in Gqeberha from 20-23 December.

"It will be the fourth red-ball contest between the two nations and only the second women's Test match in the Friendly City since South Africa hosted England there in December 1960."

Australia will also tour South Africa for three T20Is, as many ODIs and a solitary Test from March 18 to April 11, 2027.

The T20Is will be played from March 18 to 23 in Kimberley, Benoni and KuGompo City, followed by the ODIs in Gqeberha, Paarl and Durban on March 27, March 31 and April 3.

The tour will conclude with a Test match at the JB Marks Oval in the North West province from April 8 to 11. *(PTI)*

# *For Francesca Jones, playing Venus Williams at the Miami Open was surreal*

**MIAMI GARDEN (USA), March 20:** Venus Williams watched the forehand sail into the net, the final shot of her loss to Francesca Jones of Britain at the Miami Open on Thursday afternoon.

Nobody seemed to know what to do next.

Jones, who wasn't even alive when Williams won her first two Grand Slam titles, raised her arms into the air to celebrate, then put them down after a few seconds. And on the way to the net, Jones saw Williams coming her way and did something not often seen after a match.

She bowed.

Such is the level of adoration that Jones — and surely plenty of others — have for Williams, who has been one of the biggest names in tennis for about three decades now. Williams broke into a big smile when Jones bowed, then offered a handshake, then a hug and even a quick word of encouragement. And Jones, oddly, was almost apologetic when her 7-5, 7-5 win was over.

"I've had a really rough year so far," Jones said in the on-court interview following the match. "A lot of injuries and I'm still sick. I was coughing all the time. I was worried I was going to make a legend sick as well."

She truly does think of Venus — and her sister Serena Williams — as legends.

Jones still has posters in her childhood bedroom of the sisters, wishing them good night before she goes off to sleep when she's there. She still remembers being taken by her father to Centre Court at Wimbledon as a 5-year-old so she could watch her heroes play.

"If it weren't for those two women, I'm not sure I would have made the step to do it. ... They're the reason that I'm here today," Jones said.

When the match ended, fans slowly rose to their feet, first applauding Jones, then breaking into a full-on ovation as Williams — who was playing the Miami tournament for the 23rd time, while Jones is in it for the first time — gathered her things and walked off the grandstand court with a wave.

And, as is probably the case on some level every time Williams gets eliminated from the singles draw of a tournament these days, the question will hover in the tennis world: "How many more times will we see her play?"

Time will tell. There will be at least one more match in Miami Gardens; Williams is playing doubles in this tournament with Leylah Fernandez. The duo made a run to the U.S. Open quarterfinals last summer.

Carlos Alcaraz, the world's top-ranked men's player, said he hopes the Venus show keeps going for at least a little while longer.

"To be honest for us, the tennis world, someone like such an iconic player, such an iconic athlete, a legend from all the sport still playing, I think it's great," Alcaraz said, speaking while the Williams-Jones match was getting underway. "Thanks to her, I think she brought a lot of people to watch tennis, which is great. And I have a huge admiration for her. She's still playing, still delivering great tennis, performing well."

Williams, who got a wild-card spot into this field, has been part of the tournament at two different sites and with it having at least a half-dozen different names. She's reached the Miami final in three different decades, winning titles in 1998, 1999 and 2001 and being the runner-up in 2010.

It's a home tournament for Williams, which is surely part of the appeal. Her hometown is Palm Beach Gardens, about a 90-minute drive north of Hard Rock Stadium. And she's still among the partners within the ownership group of the Miami Dolphins, who call the facility home.

**For perspective:**

— As Williams took the court, Moïse Kouamé of France was finishing off a three-set win over Zachary Svajda of the U.S. in a men's first-round match. Kouamé, who became the youngest winner of a Masters 1000 match since Rafael Nadal did so in 2003, turned 17 earlier this month — meaning he's nearly 29 years younger than Williams, who turns 46 in June.

— Only nine other women in the Miami field were born before Williams played her first pro match; her debut was as a 14-year-old in 1994. *(AP)*

# Aditi has slow start in California

**MENLO PARK (US), March 20:** India's Aditi Ashok opened her campaign at the Fortinet Founders Cup with an even-par 72 to be placed tied 60th, nine shots behind leader Hyo Joo Kim here.

Ashok began her round in the back nine and made one birdie and one bogey before the turn and another birdie and a bogey on the front nine.

The birdies were made on the 17th and third holes, while the bogeys came on the 11th and sixth holes.

The 27-year-old is playing her second event of the year and would be looking to continue her fine form from China, where she finished in the top five.

Hyo Joo Kim leads the field by two strokes after carding 9-under 63 on the first day.

Kim played a flawless opening round where she was able to avoid making bogeys, something she herself admitted was the best part of the round.

Kim closed her round with an eagle on the 18th hole despite scoring being easier early in the day before the greens began to firm up. The round included seven birdies and an eagle.

Two strokes behind the leader in second place is LPGA rookie Dongeun Lee. *(PTI)*

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# Latham shines as New Zealand beat South Africa in 3rd T20 to lead series 2-1

**AUCKLAND (NEW ZEALAND), March 20:** Tom Latham carried his bat for 63 and put on 96 for the first wicket with Devon Conway to set up New Zealand's eight-wicket win over South Africa in their third Twenty20 on Friday.

Conway made 39 and Latham reached his fourth T20 half-century, helping New Zealand's cricketers pass South Africa's 136-9 with 22 balls remaining to take a 2-1 lead in the five-match series.

Batting conditions have been tricky and matches in the series have been low-scoring. South Africa won the first by seven wickets, chasing down New Zealand's 91, and the Black Caps won the second by 68 runs, bowling out the opposition for 107.

South Africa batted out 20 overs for the first time on Friday, helped by a lively unbeaten 26 from 20 balls by Nqobani Mokoena in his first international innings.

Latham and Conway began their run chase quietly, taking five runs from the first two overs and 12 from the first three. They then took 14 from the fourth over, bowled by Mokoena, and 21 from the fifth by Lutho Sipamla to set New Zealand on the way to a comfortable win.

Conway fell in the 11th over, caught in the deep by Rubin Hermann off Keshav Maharaj and Tim Robinson was out for 17 in the 17th over when the scores were tied. Nick Kelly came out and hit a single for the winning run from the next ball.

"You look at the depth we've got at the moment...with a few guys away," said New Zealand captain Mitchell Santner, who won the toss and sent South Africa in to bat.

The pitch at Eden Park typically is quick and bouncy and it provided that again but also held up at times. New Zealand used six bowlers and all six took wickets, including the spinners who helped their team make inroads in the South Africa top order.

Pace bowler Lockie Ferguson took 1-9 from four overs.

Santner found turn and, after coming on in the fifth over, dismissed Jason Smith (10) and Connor Esterhuizen (15).

Smith tried to cut a ball and mistimed his shot when the ball turned back from outside off. Esterhuizen scored all his runs in the third over before trying to hit Santner to the short, straight boundary but finding Kelly at mid-on.

Earlier, South Africa was 41-3 at the end of the powerplay and 61-5 at the midpoint of its innings.

George Linde and Gerald Coetzee put on 34 for the seventh wicket with Linde scoring 23 from 19 balls and Coetzee 16 from eight deliveries.

When Coetzee was out, South Africa was 103-8 in the 15th over and in danger again of being bowled out inside 20 overs. But Mokoena put on an unbroken partnership of 24 with Lutho Sipamla for the 10th wicket, South Africa's highest for that wicket in T20s.

The fourth match is in Wellington on Sunday. *(AP)*

# Australia and Japan meet in the final of an internationally charged Women's Asian Cup

**SYDNEY, March 20:** A Women's Asian Cup soccer tournament that started with little fanfare three weeks ago but eventually received worldwide attention due to the involvement of an Iranian team affected by the Middle East war, ends Saturday when Australia plays Japan in the final.

For most of the tournament, the Iranian team which left the Middle East before the United States and Israel invaded their home country held the international focus. Seven members of the team initially were granted asylum by the Australian government, but all but two have since returned home.

On Saturday at Sydney, two-time champion Japan and Australia will meet in the final for the third time in four Women's Asian Cups. Japan beat Australia in back-to-back finals in 2014 and 2018.

Japan beat South Korea 4-1 in Sydney in the semifinal on Wednesday, a night after Sam Kerr 's Australia edged defending champion China 2-1 in Perth.

Japan coach Nils Nielsen, a Greenland-born Dane who led Denmark to a runner-up finish at the Women's Euros in 2017, said his team may turn it up a notch in the final.

"Please don't tell Australia, but we have played better than we did today — but we were good today and I was happy with them," Nielsen said after the semifinal win. "Because it is not easy, you sort of get into a rhythm, and it wasn't that rhythm. We needed to find more, we needed to find a gear more, and we did."

Nielsen spent part of his post-match interview Wednesday praising several of the Australian players, including Kerr — "wow, she's still going strong and is one of the world's best strikers." Australia head coach Joe Montemurro echoed Nielsen's comments.

"Her presence, her aura, in the squad is immense," Montemurro said of Kerr.

Kerr has scored four goals so far this tournament, with her winning goal against China perhaps the best. After being played into the box, Kerr rounded the goalkeeper but only had a slight angle to work with, and threaded the needle for the goal.

"I just watched it while back in the ice bath — not really sure how I got it in, honestly," Kerr said.

She caused a bit of concern when she showed up Friday at the team's final training session ahead of Saturday's match with a brace on her right knee. The striker then trained fully — and without her brace — before having strapping applied.

Kerr missed a year of playing time with Chelsea and in international matches due to right anterior cruciate ligament surgery in January 2024. Kerr was just 16 years old and scored in the final when the Matildas captured the Asian Cup in 2010 with a win over North Korea on penalties.

She reflected on that big moment in Australian soccer history.

"I had no idea what I was in for," Kerr said this week. "I think that worked in my favor. I went out there and just played and just had fun and didn't realize how big a deal it was.

"And it was probably only until three Asian Cups later that we hadn't won anything that I was, Oh, that was actually a big moment'." Kerr, now 32, will have another shot at a big moment on Saturday night in Sydney. *(AP)*

# Legendary cricketers to take field in second season of IML

**MUMBAI, March 20:** Legendary cricketers like Sachin Tendulkar, Brian Lara, Shane Watson, Yuvraj Singh, Chris Gayle and Kumar Sangakkara will be in action during the second edition of the International Masters League (IML) to be held from October 24 to November 14.

The matches will be hosted across Mumbai, Vadodara and Visakhapatnam, delivering another thrilling celebration of nostalgia and world-class T20 action.

Speaking about the return of the tournament, Sunil Gavaskar, the League Commissioner, said: "Season 1 of the IML reaffirmed that the magic of cricket's greatest icons continues to resonate deeply with fans. As we return for Season 2, the focus is on elevating that experience, with greater competition, more unforgettable moments, and the same enduring passion for the game.

Fans can look forward to seeing their heroes back in action, and I am confident it will be another truly memorable edition of the tournament." The second season will feature six franchise teams representing India, Australia, South Africa, West Indies, England and Sri Lanka.

The IML made a significant impact in its debut season, emerging as the second most-watched men's T20 league in India, with a reach of 246 million across TV and OTT platforms. *(PTI)*

# Bharat sir has been adding a lot of value to our bowling: Rishabh Pant

**LUCKNOW, March 20:** Bowling was Lucknow Super Giants' weak link in the last IPL season but the addition of Bharat Arun to the support staff has helped the franchise strengthen that department, says skipper Rishabh Pant.

Pant is eyeing an improved performance in IPL 2026 after a disappointing season last year.

Speaking on JioStar, Pant shared his thoughts on LSG's pre-season camp in Chennai, how the addition of former India bowling coach Arun is benefiting the young LSG fast bowlers, and his mindset heading into the new season.

"The camp with the fast bowlers has been fantastic. Bharat Arun sir has come on board, and since he arrived, he has been adding a lot of value. We've had a lot of conversations, about what I want from the bowlers and what he thinks he can add. The energy is pure," Pant said.

"He (Arun) is one of the best bowling coaches, and I have that trust, having worked with him when he was with the Indian cricket team. He brings that experience. The bowlers trust him and open up to him, which is exactly what you want from a bowling coach, adding value to the system.

"When we look back at last season, we felt we needed to add more to our bowling. He is definitely

someone who can contribute a lot in that area, and I am really happy to have him."

On being the most fun-loving person in the dressing room, Pant said it helps lighten the team environment, especially in stressful situations.

"I think everyone is fun-loving these days because the environment is already so stressful. Everyone wants to enjoy each other's company, you can feel that emotion, the love, the enjoyment. If you carry too much stress and don't enjoy yourself, sometimes you won't be able to give your best.

"You don't want to treat it as work. I say this a lot, as kids, why did we play cricket? Yes, there is a lot at stake, a lot to lose, and the stakes will keep getting higher, but you shouldn't stop enjoying the game and having fun. I think that is something that seems to be missing these days, and if players bring that back, they will be a lot happier."

The franchise enters the new season with renewed ambitions under Pant and head coach Justin Langer, having had an inconsistent run since its debut in 2022.

Asked about his mind space going into the new edition of the IPL, Pant said, "I think I am in a good space, physically and mentally. I like to work on myself every day, and I enjoy that, because you have to spend time with yourself to keep improving. As long as you are playing cricket, that matters.

"All the seniors I speak to tell me that in cricket, you can't take it lightly even for a day. Today could be your day, but tomorrow it might not be, and that could change again the day after.

"So, just keep working hard. Decision-making and handling situations are important, but consistently working on yourself to improve, even when things are going your way, is important.

"I believe there are only two scenarios in life, either you're doing good or you're doing okay, there is nothing called bad." *(PTI)*

# Laxman Sivaramakrishnan announces retirement as commentator

**NEW DELHI, March 20:** Former India leg-spinner and veteran cricket expert Laxman Sivaramakrishnan on Friday announced his retirement from the BCCI commentary panel, citing lack of opportunities to conduct toss and presentation ceremonies as reasons to end his broadcasting career.

Sivaramakrishnan, who created ripples with his big, booming leg-spinners, googlies and and top spins as a 17-year-old in the early 1980s, expressed his frustration in a series of tweets, which suggested deep-seated dissatisfaction with his job.

"I am retiring from commentary for BCCI," Sivaramakrishnan wrote on his 'X' handle.

"If I have not been used for TOSSES and PRESENTATION for 23 years and new comers come in do pitch report Tosses Presentation even when Shastri was coaching, what do you think could be the reason.

"How does a company owning BCCI rights go down? Any guesses.

"My retirement is nothing great. But a story of tv production unfolds. Soon you will see the bigger picture," he tweeted.

Also when a user suggested if his skin colour was an issue, Sivaramakrishnan replied, "You are right. Colour Discrimination."

Sivaramakrishnan, 60, was known for expressing his views candidly for more than two decades inside the commentary box.

Fondly known as Siva, he played nine Tests and 16 ODIs for India between 1983 and 1986, years after which he began his commentary career in 2000. *(PTI)*

# Sam Curran set to miss IPL 2026 for Rajasthan Royals

**JAIPUR, March 20:** Sam Curran, England's charismatic all-rounder, is set to miss the upcoming Indian Premier League season for Rajasthan Royals due to a suspected groin injury, with the franchise exploring replacement options.

Curran, who was part of England's T20 World Cup side that recently lost to India in the semifinals, was traded by Chennai Super Kings to Rajasthan Royals last year along with Ravindra Jadeja in exchange for India wicketkeeper-batter Sanju Samson.

However, the 27-year-old all-rounder, who has previously represented Punjab Kings and Chennai Super Kings, and was the most expensive buy ahead of the 2023 Indian Premier League season at ₹ 18.5 crore, has been sidelined by injury. *(PTI)*

# Kazakhstan hockey team undergoing high-performance training in India

**NEW DELHI, March 20:** The Kazakhstan senior men's hockey team is currently in India for a high-performance training camp at Sports Authority of India's Northern Regional Centre, Sonipat, Haryana, from March 10 to 21 as part of its preparations for the upcoming Asian Games Qualifiers.

The camp, held at one of India's premier hockey training centres, offers world-class synthetic turf, advanced conditioning facilities, and an intensely competitive environment, providing Kazakhstan an ideal platform to fine-tune their skills ahead of the crucial continental assignment.

This initiative aligns with the vision of the Sports Ministry, and the Sports Authority of India to position the country as a global hub for sporting excellence by hosting and supporting international teams.

It also reflects the principles of the Olympic movement, promoting cross-border collaboration and athlete development.

"We are very pleased to be here at the Sports Authority of India Northern Regional Centre, Sonipat, which has been extremely hospitable to our team. Overall, India offers a very high standard of hockey, and that is exactly why we chose to come here — to learn, adapt, and grow.

"This is our second visit to India after competing in Rajgir, Bihar during the Hero Asia Cup 2025, and once again, the experience has been invaluable," said Kazakhstan coach Olga Urmanova in a HI statement.

"We have already played several friendly matches against local teams here in SAI Sonipat, and the level of competition has been very high, which is exactly what we need at this stage of our preparation." *(PTI)*

# Meghalaya CM felicitates Nongrum

**SHILLONG, March 20:** Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma on Thursday felicitated Sanfida Nongrum, who became the first woman footballer from the state to play for the Indian senior team and score at the Women's AFC Asian Cup, ending a 23-year goal drought for India at the tournament. Nongrum thanked the chief minister for extending financial assistance of Rs 2 lakh under the CM's Special Grant in recognition of her achievement. CM Sangma said the state government was committed to encouraging sporting talents, and added that he has spoken to companies in Meghalaya to come forward and support players like Nongrum.

Describing her as an inspiration to countless young women, the chief minister said the government was happy to back such a remarkable talent and wished her the very best in her future endeavours.

Nongrum recently scripted history by becoming the first woman from Meghalaya to represent India at the senior level of football and scoring India's first goal at the continental tournament in over two decades. A gritty India conceded a goal in the injury stoppage time to go down fighting against the higher-ranked Vietnam 1-2 in their Women's AFC Asian Cup opening match in Australia's Perth on March 4. Debutant Sanfida Nongrum, a second-half substitute, equalised in the 65th minute after Vietnam took the lead in the 30th minute through Ngan Thi Van Su.

India were agonisingly close to grabbing one point from the match, but conceded a goal in the fourth minute of the second half, added time with Ngan Thi Van Su (94th) scoring her second of the match. *(PTI)*

# *Ronnie O'Sullivan makes snooker history with a highest-ever break of 153*

**YUSHAN (CHINA), March 20:** Ronnie O'Sullivan keeps breaking records in snooker — now, at age 50, he's made the highest-ever break in the history of the professional game.

The seven-time world champion cleared the table for a break of 153 in the first frame of his 5-0 win over Ryan Day at the World Open in China on Friday.

The previous biggest break in competition was 148, made by Jamie Burnett in qualifying for the UK Championship in 2004.

"It was a pretty cool moment, really happy to do it," O'Sullivan said in a video posted on X.

The classic "maximum" break in snooker is 147 — 15 reds, 15 blacks and all the colors — but a player can score more if he starts it with a free ball. That happens when a player is snookered on all the reds following a foul by the opponent, and can nominate another ball as a red before potting a color and then starting his break as normal.

It means it is technically possible to make a break of 155.

O'Sullivan followed a free ball and a black by potting 15 reds, 13 blacks and two pinks to reach the colors, which he cleared up under huge pressure with history on the line. He smiled and laughed as he shook hands with Day, and appeared confused as he looked at the scoreboard.

"I was just thinking about trying to win the frame, you know," O'Sullivan said, "and then it got to a certain point and I did realize and I was like, It seems there's too many balls on the table so something's not quite right.'"

**O'Sullivan already has a long list of records**

O'Sullivan is widely regarded as the greatest-ever snooker player.

He is tied for the record of most world championships with Stephen Hendry, has the most major titles (23), the most ranking crowns (41) and the most 147 breaks (17), including the quickest in just 5 minutes, 8 seconds at the world championship in 1997.

Already this season, O'Sullivan, who only plays sporadically on the circuit in the latter years of his career, had made two 147s in one match — in the semifinals of the Saudi Arabia Masters.

"I still feel a little rusty, though — I obviously haven't played enough matches and tournaments," he said in a tongue-in-cheek comment. "That's what everybody seems to be saying."

Australian snooker player Neil Robertson, a former world champion, praised O'Sullivan.

"The best ever and the best there ever will be," Robertson posted on X. "Snooker fans I hope you've cherished him over the years in the joy he's brought to millions over 4 decades." *(AP)*

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