



- Hantavirus-stricken cruise ship docks in Netherlands
- Russia unleashes another aerial barrage on Ukraine as war's long-range strikes escalate
- Satheesan-led Cabinet sworn in, announces key welfare measures
- Bengal cabinet approves formation of 2 panels under ex-HC judges to probe graft: CM

## Zubeen Garg death probe: Shekharjyoti seeks bail

# Court to pronounce verdict on May 28



**Staff Reporter**

**GUWAHATI, May 18:** Assam's Fast Track Court on Monday heard the bail plea of Shekharjyoti Goswami, a former bandmate of iconic Assamese singer Zubeen Garg and one of the accused in the sensational death probe linked to the ace musician of the state.

After completion of the hearing, the court

reserved its order on Goswami's bail petition and fixed May 28 for pronouncement of the verdict.

Goswami, who has been lodged in judicial custody for the past several months, was not produced before the court on Monday.

His counsel argued for bail citing the prolonged period of incarceration, while the prosecution

opposed the plea, maintaining that the investigation into the high-profile case remains significant.

The case pertains to the death of Zubeen Garg, who died on September 19 last year while swimming near Lazarus Island in Singapore.

The incident occurred just a day before the singer was scheduled to perform at an event organised under the NEIF banner.

Following the incident, a Special Investigation Team (SIT) constituted by the Assam Police's CID conducted an extensive probe and filed a chargesheet in December.

The chargesheet named seven accused individuals, including Mahanta.

Of them, four have been booked on charges of murder, intensifying the gravity of the case.

Earlier, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma had termed the case a "plain and simple murder" during a discussion in the state Assembly, underlining the government's stance on the matter.

Meanwhile, a parallel investigation carried out by Singapore Police reached a different conclusion, stating that there was no evidence of foul play in Garg's death.

Despite this, authorities in Assam have maintained that the findings of the foreign probe will not influence the ongoing investigation and trial in the state.

The case continues to draw widespread public and political attention, with the upcoming bail hearing expected to be a crucial stage in the legal proceedings.

## CM warns against unfair price rise, orders strict market monitoring

**Staff Reporter**

**GUWAHATI, May 18:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday said the state government is closely monitoring market prices and will not allow any unfair increase in the cost of essential commodities, directing officials across districts to take stringent action against violators.

In a post on X, Sarma said the government and administration are keeping "a close eye on the market" to ensure stability in prices and protect consumers from abnormal escalation.

"Our Govt and administration is keeping a close eye on the market and will not allow any unfair price rise," the Chief Minister posted. "I have instructed officials in every district to keep a tab on prices of items and take stringent actions against any defaulter," he added.

According to a senior government official, the Chief Minister today reviewed the state's price monitoring mechanism for essential commodities and directed officials to intensify surveillance and enforcement measures across Assam.

During the review meeting, Sarma instructed Deputy Commissioner-led District Monitoring Committees to convene meetings within the next three to four days to assess the prevailing market situation and ensure compliance with government directives.

The Chief Minister also directed authorities to make the display of retail and wholesale prices mandatory at all shops and wholesale outlets to (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Assam chief secy, World Bank reviews projects worth ₹ 16,648 crore

**Staff Reporter**

**GUWAHATI, May 18:** Chief Secretary Ravi Kota on Monday said he has reviewed World Bank-aided projects, worth ₹ 16,648 crore, with officials of the lender.

The projects span critical sectors including transport connectivity, river basin management, healthcare, school education, governance reforms and resilient infrastructure development, Kota said.

The chief secretary said in a X post that he met with a delegation from the World Bank as per the directives of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

The delegation was led by Johannes Zutt, Regional Vice President of the World Bank.

"The meeting reviewed the progress of ongoing World Bank-assisted projects in Assam and deliberated upon future areas of

collaboration aligned with the State Government's developmental priorities," he added.

At present, Assam is implementing seven major World Bank-assisted externally aided projects with a cumulative outlay of approximately ₹ 16,648 crore, of which the World Bank has lent nearly ₹ 13,320 crore, Kota said.

The official said that in the meeting, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Assam to play key role in India's manufacturing push under BHAVYA initiative: Himanta



**Staff Reporter**

**GUWAHATI, May 18:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday said that manufacturing would be the key to achieving the goal of a "Viksit Bharat" and asserted that Assam is poised to play an important role in the country's industrial growth story.

Sharing details of the Centre's industrial expansion plans, the Chief Minister said the state is developing multiple industrial locations under the BHAVYA initiative of the Government of India, aimed at creating world-class plug-and-play infrastructure parks to accelerate domestic manufacturing, attract investments and generate employment opportunities.

Taking to X, Sarma said, "Manufacturing is the key to achieving #ViksitBharat, and Assam will play an important role in it. We are developing 15 sites under

BHAVYA, a Government of India industrial vision to create plug and play infra parks to boost domestic manufacturing, push growth and create job opportunities."

According to the Chief Minister, the initiative will focus on eight priority industrial parks across Assam, with an estimated investment potential of ₹ 33,600 crore.

Officials said the BHAVYA initiative is expected to significantly strengthen Assam's industrial ecosystem by improving infrastructure readiness, facilitating ease of doing business and enabling faster project execution for investors.

The proposed industrial parks are likely to cater to multiple sectors, including manufacturing, logistics, food processing, clean energy, petrochemicals and ancillary industries.

The plug-and-play model aims to provide ready infrastructure, including roads, power supply, water connectivity and common facilities, reducing the time required for industries to commence operations.

The Assam government has been aggressively pursuing industrial investments over the past few years, especially after the Advantage Assam 2.0 investment summit held earlier this year.

The state government has repeatedly highlighted Assam's strategic location in the Northeast, improved connectivity and policy incentives as major advantages for investors. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Assam bags ₹500 crore Central incentive for mining reforms: CM

**Staff Reporter**

**GUWAHATI, May 18:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday said the state has emerged as a major destination for mining and mineral-based investments after undertaking wide-ranging reforms in the sector, adding that the Centre has rewarded Assam with a ₹500 crore incentive for its achievements.

In a post on X, Sarma said Assam has taken "incremental leaps" in the mining sector by introducing major reforms and creating a transparent and investor-friendly ecosystem.

"Assam has taken incremental leaps in its mining sector, bringing major reforms and making it a lucrative sector for investments -- for which we've also received a ₹500 crore incentive from the Government of India," the Chief Minister wrote.

According to the state govern-

ment, Assam has successfully achieved all three reform components under the Government of India's Mining Sector Reforms initiative linked to the Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment (SASCI) Scheme for 2025-26.

Officials said Assam is the only state in the country to secure the full ₹500 crore incentive from the Union Ministry of Mines under the scheme.

The reforms cover three major areas -- minor mineral reforms, operationalisation of major mineral mines and implementation of State Mining Readiness Index (SMRI) reforms.

The government said Assam has also scripted one of the country's major mining reform success stories through the auction of 12 limestone blocks in Dima Hasao district, with an estimated mineral value of nearly ₹92,828 crore.

Among the notable projects is the North Boro Hundong Limestone Block (Part-B), which became operational within nine months of issuance of the Letter of Intent, making it one of the fastest mine operationalisation projects in the country.

The state government further said Assam is building a future-ready mining ecosystem through technology-enabled governance, drone and LiDAR-based monitoring, AI-driven smart mining initiatives and transparent online administration systems.

Exploration activities for limestone, coal, iron ore, granite, quartzite and rare earth elements are also being expanded across multiple districts to position Assam as a key player in India's critical mineral and infrastructure growth sector.

With the reforms focused on transparency, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Tension during Assam-M'laya border meet

**HT Correspondent**

**KHERONI, May 18:** A high-level bilateral meeting involving police and civil administration officials of West Karbi Anglong district in Assam and West Jaintia Hills district in Meghalaya witnessed tense scenes on Sunday after objections were raised over the participation of civilians in the closed-door discussions on the inter-state border dispute.

The meeting was held in the sensitive Tapat border area to discuss long-pending boundary issues between Assam and Meghalaya and explore measures to maintain law and order along the disputed region.

Senior officials from both states attended the deliberations.

Tension escalated after local residents from the Karbi community discovered that four civilians from the Meghalaya side had reportedly been allowed to enter the confidential administrative meeting.

Local people objected strongly, arguing that ordinary civilians should not be present during official discussions between the two administrations.

The situation soon led to heated arguments involving local residents, personnel of the Assam Police and the Meghalaya Police.



Following the protest and public opposition, the four Meghalaya civilians were eventually asked to leave the meeting venue, after which the discussions resumed behind closed doors.

Speaking to reporters after the meeting, Priti Kumari said discussions involving villagers of Tapat and Lapang-ap in Meghalaya had concluded and details of the outcome would be shared later through an official press release.

She added that further meetings could also be held on specific matters if required. Meanwhile, Tuliram Ronghang appealed for (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Debabrata Saikia rejects BJP switch rumours, calls it 'political conspiracy'



**Staff Reporter**

**GUWAHATI, May 18:** Former Leader of Opposition in the Assam Assembly, Debabrata Saikia, on Monday dismissed rumours of joining the BJP and contesting the upcoming by-election from the Na-

gaon Lok Sabha constituency, terming them "completely baseless" and part of a "deep conspiracy".

Addressing reporters, the senior Congress leader asserted that he remains firmly with the Congress

party and has no intention of leaving the organisation or contesting any by-election.

"I have always been in politics to serve the people and will continue to do so. The rumours being spread by a section of people regarding my joining the BJP and contesting from Nagaon are entirely false and politically motivated," Saikia said.

He further alleged that attempts were being made to sideline him from Assam politics, but described such efforts as "bound to fail".

The by-election to the Nagaon Lok Sabha seat has become politically significant after Congress MP Pradyut Bordoloi switched to the BJP ahead of the recent Assembly elections.

Bordoloi, who had won the 2024 Lok Sabha polls on a Congress ticket, later contested the Assembly elections from Dispur on a BJP ticket and (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Empty coach derailed, no one injured



**GUWAHATI, May 18:** One empty coach derailed during routine yard shunting activities in Guwahati on Monday, officials of Northeast Frontier (NFR) Railway said.

There has been no report of any injury or loss of life in the accident, they added.

"During yard shunting at Guwahati Railway yard as a part of regular maintenance and upkeep activities on 18.05.2026, there was an incident of derailment of one empty coach," NFR Chief Public Relations Officer Kapinjal Kishore Sharma said in a statement.

This coach was not part of any train, and there were no passengers on this (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Supply of petrol, diesel, LPG normal in Assam: Oil Ministry

**GUWAHATI, May 18:** Supplies of all types of petroleum products, including petrol, diesel and LPG, are fully normal across Assam, the Oil Ministry said on Monday.

It requested the public to continue with normal consumption patterns and refrain from panic buying.

The state-level coordinator for the oil industry in Assam-cum-executive director and state head of Indian Oil, has informed that the availability of essential petroleum products, including petrol, diesel and Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), remains normal and uninterrupted across Assam, the Ministry of Petroleum & Natural Gas said in a statement.

"Public Sector oil marketing companies -- Indian Oil Corporation Ltd (IOCL), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL), and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) -- are maintaining adequate fuel stocks across all supply locations, and the overall supply position in the region continues to

remain stable," it added.

"The public is requested to remain assured and continue with normal consumption patterns and refrain from panic buying. Consumers are advised to rely only on official communications from oil marketing companies for accurate and verified information regarding fuel availability," the statement said.

The entire fuel supply chain, from terminals and depots to retail outlets, is operating efficiently and without any disruption, it added.

"Fuel stocks are being continuously monitored, and replenishment activities are progressing smoothly across all locations in the state," the official release said.

LPG supplies to domestic consumers are being prioritised and remain normal across the state.

"The situation is being closely monitored to ensure uninterrupted delivery to all consumers," it added.

The oil industry is maintaining close (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Rare Himalayan plant rediscovered in Arunachal after 120 years



western Arunachal Pradesh.

The research team, comprising botanists Subhajit Lahiri, Monalisa Das and Sudhansu Sekhar Dash, located the species in the Se La area between Tawang and West Kameng districts at an altitude of

around 4,200 metres.

The findings have since been documented in the international scientific journal Phytotaxa, which described the rediscovery as a major contribution to understanding the fragile Eastern Himalayan

ecosystem.

Scientists noted that the plant was last reliably collected in India in 1905 from Sikkim, with only a few historical records available thereafter.

A member of the rose family, Geum macrosepalum is characterised by its pale yellow to ivory-yellow flowers tinged with reddish hues and drooping blossoms adapted to harsh alpine environments.

Researchers found the species growing in alpine meadows and marshy terrain in one of the least explored landscapes of the Indian Himalaya.

Using International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) assessment parameters, the researchers classified the species as "Vulnerable" in India owing to its restricted (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

# Stock markets end marginally higher on buying in IT counters

**MUMBAI, May 18:** Benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty ended marginally higher on Monday after facing sharp losses in intraday trade, supported by value buying in IT and select blue-chip counters.

However, a weak rupee against the US dollar and rising global crude prices amid escalated tensions in West Asia capped the gains, traders said.

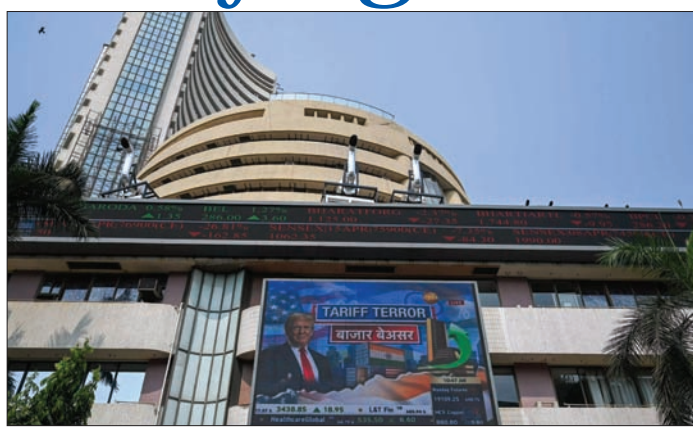
In an extremely volatile trade, the 30-share BSE Sensex increased by 77.05 points, or 0.10 per cent, to settle at 75,315.04. During the day, it tanked 1,134.78 points, or 1.50 per cent, to 74,180.26.

A total of 3,034 stocks declined while 1,264 advanced and 194 remained unchanged on the BSE.

The 50-share NSE Nifty edged higher by 6.45 points, or 0.03 per cent, to end at 23,649.95.

"...market sentiment witnessed a mild recovery from intraday lows but remained largely weak due to a mix of global and domestic pressures. The rebound was primarily supported by value buying at lower levels along with selective strength in IT and pharma stocks, which helped the indices trim part of their losses.

"However, the upside remained limited as rising crude oil prices, continued weakness in the rupee near record lows, and sustained FII outflows continued to weigh on the market," Gaurav Garg, Research Analyst at Lemnon Markets



Desk, said.

From the Sensex firms, Tech Mahindra, Infosys, Bharti Airtel, Bajaj Finserv, Sun Pharma, HCL Tech, Bajaj Finance and Tata Consultancy Services were among the major winners.

In contrast, Tata Steel, Power Grid, State Bank of India and NTPC were major laggards.

The BSE MidCap Select index climbed 0.17 per cent, while the SmallCap Select index dropped 1.62 per cent.

Among the sectoral indices, BSE Focused IT jumped 2.53 per cent, IT (1.95 per cent), Healthcare (0.22 per cent) and Telecommunication (0.05 per cent).

PSU Bank declined 1.81 per cent, Auto dropped 1.74 per cent, Consumer Discretionary (1.26 per cent), Metal (1.13 per cent), Consumer Durables (1.05 per cent) and Oil & Gas (1.01 per cent).

benchmark, traded 0.73 per cent higher at USD 110.1 per barrel.

"The Indian rupee extended its losing streak for the seventh straight session...driven by rising geopolitical tensions pushing crude oil prices higher. Additionally, a sharp uptick in both global and domestic bond yields signalled expectations of a prolonged high-interest-rate environment. Concerns over a widening trade deficit and declining forex reserves further added to the pressure on the currency," Nandish Shah - Deputy Vice President, HDFC Securities, said.

The rupee weakened further and closed at a record low of 96.35 (provisional) against the US dollar on Monday.

In Asian markets, Japan's benchmark Nikkei, Shanghai's SSE Composite index and Hong Kong's Hang Seng ended lower, while South Korea's benchmark Kospi settled in positive territory.

Markets in Europe were trading on a mixed note.

US markets ended over 1 per cent lower on Friday.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth ₹ 1,329.17 crore on Friday, according to exchange data.

In the previous session on Friday, the Sensex dropped 160.73 points, or 0.21 per cent, to settle at 75,237.99. The Nifty settled lower by 46.10 points, or 0.19 per cent, at 23,643.50, snapping its two-day gaining streak. (PTI)

"Markets witnessed a volatile session on Monday, with benchmark indices ending almost unchanged amid weak global cues and persistent macroeconomic concerns. The Nifty opened gap-down and remained under pressure during the first half of the session; however, a rebound in select heavyweight counters helped trim losses as the day progressed.

"The weakness was primarily driven by escalating geopolitical tensions in the Middle East after renewed hostilities between the US and Iran intensified concerns over global energy supplies. Brent crude surged above the USD 110 per barrel mark, fuelling fears over inflation, India's current account position, and margin pressure across crude-sensitive sectors," Ajit Mishra - SVP, Research, Religare Broking Ltd, said.

Brent crude, the global oil

# ₹ 3 a litre fuel price hike cuts losses by 25 pc; daily loss drops to ₹ 750 cr



**NEW DELHI, May 18:** A ₹ 3-per-litre increase in petrol and diesel prices has helped state-run oil marketing companies trim daily losses by nearly a quarter, reducing overall losses to around ₹ 750 crore per day from ₹ 1,000 crore, a senior oil ministry official said Monday.

However, elevated global crude prices and a weak rupee continue to keep pump rates below cost-recovery levels.

At a news briefing, Sujata Sharma, Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, said a bailout package, in the form of a government subsidy to make up for losses state-owned oil companies are incurring on selling petrol, diesel and cooking gas LPG below cost, is "still not on the table".

International oil prices rose sharply after the US-Israeli war against Iran triggered the largest-ever oil supply disruption. To keep the domestic market insulated, the state-owned oil companies continued to sell fuel at two-year-old rates till May 15, when prices of petrol and diesel were raised by ₹ 3 per litre.

The increase followed daily losses, climbing to an unprecedented ₹ 1,000 crore per day. The losses in a quarter rose to ₹ 1 lakh crore - enough to wipe out earnings of

an entire year.

There "still is ₹ 750 crore a day under-recovery", Sharma said.

Analysts said the decision to raise petrol and diesel prices by ₹ 3 per litre will provide only limited relief to state-run fuel retailers, while adding modest inflationary pressure and doing little to offset mounting losses from elevated global crude prices.

The fuel price increase - the first in more than four years - comes after a sharp rally in oil prices, following the Iran conflict disrupting flows through the Strait of Hormuz, pushing up costs for oil marketing companies (OMCs) and increasing pressure on government finances.

According to Radhika Rao, Senior Economist & Executive Director, DBS Bank, higher pump prices were likely to moderate fuel demand and reduce the import burden, while estimating the increase could add 15-25 basis points to headline inflation, excluding second-round effects.

While Prashant Vasishth of Iera said the increase was insufficient to restore profitability for OMCs if crude prices remain elevated, Crisil's Sehul Bhatt described the increase as a "meaningful, if partial, step" toward reversing one of the longest under-recovery cycles in recent years.

"At their peak, oil marketing companies were absorbing losses of ₹ 23-30 per litre on petrol and diesel, translating to a combined daily loss of ₹ 1,300-1,400 crore," Bhatt said.

According to Crisil estimates, government excise duty relief and the latest price increase have narrowed under-recoveries to about ₹ 10 per litre on petrol and ₹ 13 on diesel, though cumulative losses since the start of the conflict are expected to exceed ₹ 1 lakh crore by the end of May. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

## Tension during Assam-M'laya

calm while addressing reporters on the sidelines of another programme. "So far nothing untoward has happened. Discussion is going on. A solution will be found through discussion," he said.

Ronghang further stated that he had personally spoken several times with Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad Sangma regarding the issue and noted that committees from both sides were engaged in dialogue to resolve the dispute.

## Debabrata Saikia rejects

secured victory by a comfortable margin. Saikia also raised concerns over what he termed as growing threats to democracy and criticised the functioning of the Election Commission.

"The current situation is worrying. We are witnessing a weakening of democratic institutions, and the role being played by the Election Commission has been disappointing," he alleged.

The Congress leader further slammed the BJP-led government over rising prices of essential commodities, claiming that common people were suffering due to inflation immediately after the elections.

Without naming Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma directly, Saikia took a swipe at those calling him "Chanakya", saying that Chanakya's principles emphasised respect for educated people and avoiding wastage of public money - values he claimed were absent in the present dispensation.

He also accused the government of indulging in "fake degree politics" and making false promises instead of addressing the real issues faced by the people.

Saikia reiterated that the Congress party's fight for the people of Assam would continue and expressed confidence that "truth will ultimately prevail."

## Assam chief secy

they highlighted Assam's focus on resilient infrastructure, digital governance reforms and citizen-centric service delivery, and emphasised the transformative impact of governance and technology-driven initiatives.

The Assam government requested the World Bank to consider greater flexibility in minimum project size norms for governance, institutional reform and digital transformation projects, he added.

"Also sought enhanced engagement of the International Finance Corporation (IFC) for supporting Public Private Partnership (PPP) initiatives and infrastructure asset monetisation through technical and transaction advisory support for development of bankable PPP models across key sectors," Kota said.

The World Bank delegation appreciated the state's implementation progress and reassured flexibility in designing future operations aligned with timelines and outcomes, and emphasised the need to identify sectors where PPP models can be effectively financed, he added.

Kota said they discussed sustainable maintenance and lifecycle management of infrastructure assets created under externally aided projects.

The Assam government requested support for the creation of an Asset Management Fund, strengthening of institutional mechanisms and development of a digital Asset Management Information System for monitoring and maintenance of public infrastructure," Kota said in the post.

He said that the World Bank delegation appreciated the progress of ongoing projects in Assam and reaffirmed its continued support towards the state's developmental priorities. (PTI)

## CM warns against

maintain transparency and prevent arbitrary pricing practices. Officials said Sarma warned that strict action would be taken against traders found indulging in abnormal price hikes, including cancellation of trade licences in serious cases.

The state government has also asked Deputy Commissioners to hold weekly review meetings with chambers of commerce and trade bodies to regularly assess market trends and address grievances related to pricing and supply of essential commodities.

Further, the Chief Minister directed officials to undertake intensive field-level monitoring to detect and prevent unusual price escalation in local markets.

In another key direction, Sarma asked officials to expedite Aadhaar seeding of beneficiaries under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana to eliminate duplicity in LPG cylinder distribution and ensure that benefits reach genuine consumers.

The government said the measures are aimed at maintaining market stability, checking profiteering and ensuring uninterrupted availability of essential goods for the public.

## Assam to play key

Sarma has maintained that Assam is emerging as a major investment destination in eastern India and that industrial growth would be crucial for employment generation and economic expansion in the state.

The Chief Minister also reiterated that the state government is working in close coordination with the Centre to transform Assam into a major manufacturing and logistics hub in the Northeast region.

## Empty coach derails,

coach, he added. "The coach is being rerailed. There is no impact on railway operations as a result of this incident," Sharma said. (PTI)

## Supply of petrol,

coordination on logistics, stock movement and retail operations to ensure seamless availability of fuel across the region. (PTI)

## Assam bags ₹500

sustainability and efficiency, the government said Assam is steadily moving towards scientific and responsible mineral development while boosting economic growth and investor confidence.

## Rare Himalayan plant

distribution and mounting habitat pressures caused by developmental activities and ecological disturbances in fragile mountain ecosystems.

Scientists involved in the study emphasised that the rediscovery underlines the urgent need for intensified floristic research and long-term conservation efforts in Arunachal Pradesh, which forms part of the globally recognised Eastern Himalaya biodiversity hotspot.

The region is known for harbouring numerous endemic and rare species of flora and fauna, many of which remain undocumented because of difficult terrain and limited scientific exploration.

The rediscovery has drawn attention from conservationists, scientists and policymakers alike, with Arunachal Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein hailing the finding as a reminder of the state's extraordinary ecological wealth.

"Rediscovering a forgotten treasure of the Eastern Himalaya. The rare Geum macrosepalum, unseen in India for nearly 120 years, has been found again in the alpine landscapes of Arunachal Pradesh, highlighting the rich biodiversity and ecological significance of the region," Mein said in a post on X on Monday.

Over the past few years, Arunachal Pradesh has emerged as a major centre for botanical discoveries and re-discoveries. Several new and rare plant species, including orchids, begonias and alpine herbs, have been identified from the state's remote mountainous regions. (PTI)

## MANN+WIX Filters dealers' meet held in Guwahati

HT Bureau

**GUWAHATI, May 18:** A dealers' meet of MANN+WIX Filters was organised in Guwahati by Auto Sales India Limited, bringing together more than 50 dealers and business representatives from Guwahati and nearby areas.

The programme focused on creating awareness about modern filtration technology, product quality and emerging market opportunities in the automobile sector.

During the event, dealers appreciated the quality, durability and performance of MANN+WIX Filters products.

Several participants reportedly placed orders during the meet itself, citing growing market demand for reliable and premium-quality filtration products.

Ahead of the dealers' meet, a special technical interaction and awareness session was organised for automobile mechanics.

The session highlighted the importance of vehicle filters, proper maintenance practices and timely replacement to ensure better vehicle performance.

Mechanics attending the session interacted with experts to gain practical knowledge on filtration systems.

Naveen Sethi, All India Head of MANN Filters, delivered a presentation on the company's global operations, technological advancements, product quality and future expansion plans.

He stated that MANN+WIX Filters is among the world's leading filter manufacturing companies, known for supplying high-quality filtration solutions to the automobile industry worldwide.

Addressing the gathering, Arun Bajaj said the company has been distributing products of reputed brands across Northeast India for the past 25 years.

## ASCI's AdWise programme reaches over one million students across India

HT Bureau

**GUWAHATI, May 18:** Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) has announced that its classroom advertising literacy initiative, AdWise, has reached more than one million students across the country.

According to ASCI, the programme has covered 10,66,374 students across 2,063 schools in states including Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, Rajasthan, Karnataka, West Bengal, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu.

The initiative, developed by the ASCI Academy, aims to help students understand digital advertising, influencer promotions and embedded brand content, while enabling them to critically assess commercial messaging and identify advertisements disguised as content.

ASCI stated that the programme demonstrated significant improvement in advertising literacy levels among students after classroom in-

terventions.

Among students from Classes 3 to 5, the percentage of those able to correctly recognise the purpose of advertisements reportedly increased from 43 per cent to 94 per cent, while understanding of persuasive advertising intent rose from 32 per cent to 87 per cent.

The number of students able to identify advertisements mimicking regular content increased from 36 per cent to 90 per cent.

For students from Classes 6 to 8, recognition of the purpose of advertisements increased from 45 per cent to 92 per cent, while understanding of influencer promotions rose from 39 per cent to 88 per cent. Awareness regarding online safety and persuasive advertising techniques also recorded significant improvement.

The AdWise sessions were conducted in eight languages, including Assamese, and used interactive learning modules, classroom discus-

sions, videos and activities tailored for different age groups.

Manisha Kapoor said children today are growing up in an environment where advertising and content are increasingly intertwined.

She stated that media and advertising literacy have become essential life skills for young audiences exposed to digital content and brands from an early age.

Kapoor also acknowledged the support of SHARP NGO in helping the initiative reach more than a million students.

Apart from students, the programme also provides educational resources for teachers and parents to encourage continued learning beyond classrooms.

ASCI said the initiative is part of its broader efforts to strengthen responsible advertising practices and consumer awareness among children and young audiences across India.

## Tata-ASML partnership marks major boost for India's semiconductor ambitions: IESA

HT Bureau

**GUWAHATI, May 18:** India Electronics and Semiconductor Association (IESA) has welcomed the partnership announcement between Tata Electronics and ASML, describing it as a landmark development in India's semiconductor manufacturing journey.

Commenting on the development, Ashok Chandak, President of IESA and SEMI India, said the collaboration represented a historic breakthrough for India's semiconductor ecosystem.

ASML is regarded globally as a leading semiconductor equipment manufacturer and a key player in advanced lithography systems used in the production of high-end chips powering artificial intelligence, computing, automotive and communication technologies.

According to Chandak, the partnership between ASML and Tata Electronics could become a game changer for India's semiconductor fabrication ecosystem.

He noted that the Tata Group is making one of India's largest investments in semiconductor and electronics manufacturing, covering semiconductor fabrication units, OSAT facilities and broader high-technology infrastructure.

The development also aligns with the enhanced India-Netherlands Strategic Partnership roadmap, which focuses on inno-



vation, advanced technologies, resilient semiconductor supply chains and high-technology collaboration between the two countries.

Chandak said India's increasing emphasis on semiconductor design, artificial intelligence, advanced manufacturing and deep-tech innovation is attracting global technology leaders to participate in India's semiconductor growth story.

He further observed that India is steadily emerging not only as a semiconductor manufacturing destination but also as a trusted global hub for semiconductor innovation, engineering talent and future technology collaborations.

The IESA president also acknowledged the support of Union

Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw and the efforts of the India Semiconductor Mission and the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology in accelerating India's semiconductor mission.

He additionally appreciated the role played by Marisa Gerards in strengthening semiconductor and technology cooperation between India and the Netherlands.

Chandak noted that ASML's engagement with India had deepened following its participation in SEMICON India 2025 and subsequent leadership visits to the country, which are now translating into long-term strategic partnerships.

He said the latest development reflects India's semiconductor journey moving steadily "from vision to execution and outcome."

## RBI discontinues IFR requirement for banks

**MUMBAI, May 18:** The Reserve Bank on Monday discontinued the requirement for commercial banks to maintain Investment Fluctuation Reserve (IFR), an additional buffer to hedge against depreciation in the value of investments.

In view of the developments in the prudential frameworks governing market risk and investments for commercial banks, there is a need to amend the extant instructions, it said while issuing Reserve Bank of India (Commercial Banks - Classification, Valuation, and Operation of Investment Portfolio) Second Amendment Directions, 2026.

The requirement of IFR has been discontinued with effect from May 18, 2026, said a circular.

The balance in the IFR as on May 17, 2026, shall be transferred 'below the line' to Statutory Reserve, General Reserve, or Balance of Profit and Loss Account, it said.

For a foreign bank operating in India in branch mode, the balance in IFR shall be transferred directly to statutory reserves kept in Indian books or remittable surplus retained in Indian books which is not repatriable so long as the bank functions in India, RBI said. (PTI)

**MANPOWER BASED CLEANING AT NEW TINSUKIA**  
**E-Tender No. C-Cleaning-NTSKGOODS Dated: 14-05-2026.** E-Tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following works:  
**Name of Work:** Manpower based cleaning of New Tinsukia Goods yard for a period of 03 (Three) years.  
**Tender Value:** ₹ 1,33,01,417.68/-  
**Earnest Money:** ₹ 2,16,500/-  
**Date & time of closing of tender:** At 15.00 hrs. on 05-06-2026. The complete information with tender documents of above e-Tender will be available in [www.irebs.gov.in](http://www.irebs.gov.in)

DCM (C)/Tinsukia  
**NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY**  
*Serving Customers With A Smile*

**NOTICE INVITING EXPRESSION OF INTEREST**  
**No. EO/Medical/TSK/01 of 2026-27 Dated: 13-05-2026**  
 Chief Medical Superintendent, N.F. Railway, Tinsukia on behalf of the President of India, invites Expression of Interest (EOI) for imaging (USG/X-Ray)/Pathological investigations centers at CGHS rates for railway beneficiaries All Health Units of Tinsukia Division at Furkating, Mariani, Simaluguri, North Lakhimpur, Tinsukia, Ledo, Dhemajai for a period of 02 years.  
 The interested Diagnostic centers may download the details from the website of <http://www.nfr.indianrailways.gov.in> For further queries contact office of the Chief Medical Superintendent, Divisional Railway Hospital, Dibrugarh - 9957555506.

**Time Line**  
 1. Issue of (EOI) Expression of Interest - 14/05/2026  
 2. Venue - CMS office, Divisional Railway Hospital, Dibrugarh  
 3. Last Date of submission of proposal - 30/05/2026 time- 13.00 hrs.  
 4. Date of Opening of the proposal - 30/05/2026 time- 15.30 hrs.

Chief Medical Superintendent, Tinsukia  
**NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY**  
*"SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH A SMILE"*

## Former minister extends financial support to bereaved family in Sivasagar

### Pijush Hazarika donates ₹ 1 Lakh to late poet Jonmani Das' family



**HT Correspondent**  
SIVASAGAR, May 18: Pijush Hazarika, former minister and

MLA of Jagiroad LAC, through a delegation, donated ₹ 1 lakh to the bereaved family of young As-

samese poet Jonmani Das, who passed away on Wednesday morning at his residence in Sivasagar Thanamukh.

The delegation, including Mridul Das, Central Committee Secretary of the All Assam Scheduled Castes Students' Union, Dipankar Hazarika, General Secretary of the SC Development Council, Dhruv Hazarika, Dilip Das, Kunal Pratim Muktiar, Neilash Bosfar and Vikas Burman, handed over the cash to Tarali Hazarika Das, wife of the late poet, on Sunday.

The Sivasagar journalists' fraternity, Rangpur Sahitya Sabha and several other organisations have appreciated Hazarika's gesture towards the poet's family.

## Forest team clears fallen trees in Kokrajhar after severe storm

**HT Correspondent**

**KOKRAJHAR, May 18:** Following a severe storm on Sunday night, the forest team cleared fallen trees and branches from different parts of Kokrajhar town to restore road communication.

Under the leadership of Ranger Pintu Sarkar of the Forest Depot Office, Kokrajhar, forest staff carried out tree-clearing operations in several affected areas. Trees and large branches had fallen at multiple locations, including between V-Mart Mall and the HS Police Point, near the Soil Conservation Department at Habrubar and inside the Habrubar Forest Colony. A tree also fell inside the SPOffice campus, causing damage to the office, while another tree fell inside the CHD Forest Bungalow campus. The forest team removed fallen trees from several roads and continued restoration work in different locations.

The team cleared a fallen tree in front of Kokrajhar Jail and removed branches of a banyan tree, though complete clearance was not possible due to its large size. Branches of a kadam tree near HMB were also removed to reopen the road. Restoration work was later carried out at the CHD Forest and the DFO Bungalow.

Meanwhile, the storm caused heavy damage in many parts of Kokrajhar, especially in areas on the southern side of the railway line. Narabari, Chandrapara, Fakiragram and Banargaon reported major damage. Electricity supply remains disrupted in some areas after the APDCL control room suffered serious damage.

According to APDCL, thousands of consumers were affected after damage to High Tension (HT) and Low Tension (LT) power networks. Restoration work is underway, with priority being given to essential services and healthcare institutions.

## Rotary Club installs clean water facility at Nagaon School

**HT Correspondent**

**NAGAON, May 18:** In a significant step towards ensuring safe and clean drinking water for children in Nagaon, the Rotary Club of Nagaon successfully implemented the Jal Jeevan Project at Vivekananda High School in Nagaon town a couple of days ago.

The project involved the installation of a modern water filter and cooler unit on the school premises, providing approximately 600 students with consistent access to clean, safe and chilled drinking water — a basic necessity that is often overlooked in school infrastructure. This marks the first time the students will have reliable access to purified drinking water within their school campus.

Beyond the immediate benefit to students, the project is expected to have a lasting impact on health and hygiene awareness among the school community. Access to clean water is directly linked to reduced waterborne illnesses, better attendance and improved concentration among school-going children — benefits that extend to the broader community. Vivekananda High School, one of the established institutions in Nagaon town, serves a diverse student body from various parts of the region. With this installation, students no longer need to depend on unsafe water sources or carry water from home, a burden that disproportionately affects younger children.

The Rotary Club of Nagaon has consistently worked towards community development initiatives in health, education and sanitation. The Jal Jeevan Project is a continuation of that commitment, rooted in the belief that every child deserves a clean and healthy learning environment. Sharing his thoughts on the initiative, RTN Aman Dassani, president of the Rotary Club of Nagaon, said that clean water is not a privilege but a right. Through the Jal Jeevan Project, the club wanted to ensure that no child in the community has to choose between thirst and unsafe water, he added. He further expressed hope that this small step would create a large and lasting difference in the lives of these 600 students and their families.

The Rotary Club of Nagaon remains committed to serving the community and looks forward to expanding such impactful initiatives to more schools and institutions across the district in the coming years, the press note stated.

## Gossaigaon Swarnadal Branch Sahitya Sabha holds biennial session

**HT Correspondent**

**GOSSAIGAON, May 18:** The biennial session of the Gossaigaon Swarnadal Branch Sahitya Sabha, functioning under the Kokrajhar District Sahitya Sabha of the Assam Sahitya Sabha was held with a day-long programme at the Kamal Nath Club-cum-Library here on Saturday.

As the tenure of the existing executive committee came to an end, the committee was dissolved and a new executive body was constituted during the session. The programme commenced at 9 AM with the hoisting of the Sabha flag by outgoing president Khanindra Nath Das. This was followed by a memorial tribute ceremony conducted by retired teacher of Ramphal Bil Higher Secondary School, Girish Chandra Deka, as the chief mourner. In the subjects selection meeting held from 10 AM, a new executive committee was unanimously formed with Pradip Das, Head of the Department of Political Science, Gossaigaon College, as president and retired science teacher of Gossaigaon Higher Secondary School, Nurul Hoque, as secretary.

Writer and litterateur Dr Dinesh Das, newly appointed Registrar of Bongaigaon University, attended the open session as chief guest and delivered a speech. Extending his greetings to the newly formed committee, he expressed hope that the new leadership would further strengthen the literary and linguistic activities of the branch and make it more dynamic in other spheres as well.

Among others, Kokrajhar District Sahitya Sabha president Nazmul Hoque, secretary Sarat Deka, former secretary Hitesh Dev Sharma, Padmadhar Das, Manik Deka, Dharamidhar Pathak, Shantiram Ray, Dilip Saha, Dr Lavanya Lahkar, Mrinalini Deka Kalita, Kabita Choudhury, Souda Barman, Prof Rakhi Sarkar, Konwar Mardi, Ajit Barman, Sushil Barman, Chinmoy Ball, Dipak Baishya, Bijon Kumar De, Shankar Das, Ratneswar Debnath, Hafizur Rahman, Upal De and Mizanur Rahman were present at the meeting attended by a large number of people from different communities.

## National Hypertension Day observed in West Karbi Anglong with health camps

Screening drives held across PHCs and jail premises to raise awareness on rising blood pressure cases



**HT Correspondent**

**HAMREN, May 18:** Along with the rest of the country and the state, National Hypertension Day was observed in West Karbi Anglong district on Sunday with a series of comprehensive awareness programmes and medical initiatives.

Under the joint banner of the West Karbi Anglong District Health Society and the Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD) Cell, special health check-up camps were organised across all Block Primary Health Centres (BPHCs) and Ayushman Aarogya Mandirs throughout the district.

As the flagship event of the district-level observance, a special screening camp was organised at the Hamren District Jail. The camp focused on evaluating the health status of both prison inmates and police personnel on duty.

During the drive, health officials from the Medical

Mobile Unit educated attendees on the long-term health risks associated with high blood pressure, emphasising preventive measures that individuals must adopt in daily life.

Attending the programme at the Hamren District Jail, District Programme Manager (DPM) Hilton Saikia highlighted the growing global threat of cardiovascular diseases.

"High blood pressure is a major cause of premature deaths worldwide," Saikia said. He added that while earlier it was believed hypertension affected only people above 40, a significant number of young individuals are now also being affected.

Saikia further said that frontline health workers have been conducting door-to-door screenings for early detection. High-risk patients identified during these drives are referred to Ayushman Aarogya Mandirs and district health centres, where they receive free essential medicines. He assured that the initiative would be further intensified in the coming days.

Widespread district coverage was also achieved through awareness and screening programmes under several Block Primary Health Centres, including Baithalanso BPHC, Umpanai BPHC, Jirikindeng BPHC and Donkamukam BPHC.

These camps covered areas such as Lamsakhang, Tika, Dayangmukh, Borkok, Satgaon, Jengkha, Phangtengphrang, Longpi, Punjaborpathar, Bithung Rengthama, Kungripi and Panimur. Hundreds of residents underwent blood pressure screenings, received medical advice and were educated on lifestyle modifications to combat hypertension.

## NFR commissions automatic block signaling in Bengal section

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, May 18:** The Katihar Division of Northeast Frontier Railway has successfully commissioned Automatic Block Signalling (ABS) in the Panjipara-Kishanganj-Hatwar-Kanki-Surjakamal section of West Bengal.

The newly commissioned ABS section spans approximately 30 kilometres and covers five stations, comprising three Electronic Interlocking (EI) stations and two Panel Interlocking (PI) stations. As part of the commissioning work, four auto signal huts have been installed to enhance signaling efficiency and operational safety.

A total of 14 level crossing gates fall within the section, out of which six gates have been newly interlocked with the automatic signaling system for improved safety and smoother train operations. Additionally, 196 Multi Section Digital Axle Counter (MSDAC) detection points and 40 new automatic signals have been installed in the section.

The commissioning of Automatic Block Signaling is expected to significantly enhance line capacity, improve punctuality and ensure safer and more efficient train movements



in this important corridor under the Katihar Division.

Northeast Frontier Railway has undertaken major signaling and safety enhancement works across its network in recent years. During 2025-26, NFR installed a total of 24 interlocked level crossing gates, replaced five Panel Interlocking systems with Electronic Interlocking systems, commissioned 22.29 Route Kilometres (RKM) of Automatic Block Signaling and installed 25 sliding booms at interlocked level crossing gates.

The successful completion of this major signaling upgrade is another important step towards enhancing railway safety across the zone. In future, the system will be extended further up to Guwahati to improve line capacity, safety and train operations.

The development reflects the continued commitment of Northeast Frontier Railway towards modernisation of railway infrastructure, enhancement of operational efficiency and strengthening of safety standards across its network.

## Bear sightings on Jorhat outskirts spark panic

**HT Correspondent**

**JORHAT, May 18:** The sighting of a bear in different areas on the outskirts of Jorhat over the past few days has created fear among local residents.

According to a Forest department source, information was first received three days ago about a bear being sighted in the Solmara area on the western outskirts at night by a few locals. Following this, a forest team visited the site and attempted to track the animal.

Similarly, late on Sunday, the bear was sighted at Bahona Rongdoi Dagaon on the northeastern outskirts, several kilometres away from the earlier location. A person returning by car reportedly spotted the animal and raised an alarm, after which the Forest department was informed.

Sources said that a Forest team arrived at the spot during the night and found footprints of the wild animal. Efforts are underway to track the bear, which is suspected to have come from Kaziranga National Park, as both areas are not far from the Brahmaputra river.

There have been instances of wild animals such as rhinos and tigers straying from Kaziranga National Park, using the sandbars (chaporis) of the Brahmaputra to move to adjoining districts.

It may also be mentioned that two bear cubs were found by a villager in the backyard of his house at Deberapar Nakachari area near the Assam-Nagaland border under the Mariani Range of Jorhat Forest Division about a year ago.

## Orientation programme on IEC campaign held in Baksa

**HT Correspondent**

**KOKRAJHAR, May 18:** An orientation programme on the nationwide IEC Campaign "Jan Bhagidari - Sabse Door, Sabse Pehle" under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India was held at the Conference Hall of the District Centre, Baksa on Sunday, followed by a cleanliness drive within the campus premises. Addressing the gathering, District Commissioner Kimmel Changan stressed the importance of ensuring effective outreach of government welfare schemes to tribal communities and called upon all officers and field-level functionaries to actively engage with people at the grassroots level. She emphasised mandatory field visits, direct interaction with villagers and timely resolution of grievances and developmental issues. She further urged all participating departments to work in close coordination to ensure that the ben-

efits of schemes reach every eligible beneficiary without delay. MLA Thaneswar Basumatary highlighted the need for effective last-mile delivery of welfare schemes and facilities, stating that implementation should be regularly monitored to assess whether intended beneficiaries are actually receiving services on the ground. He also underlined the importance of addressing minor but persistent local issues affecting rural communities.

During the programme, detailed discussions were held regarding the execution of the implementation action plan for the week-long campaign scheduled from May 18 to May 25 across the district. Activities planned under the campaign include grievance hearing programmes, Jan Sunwai, health camps, entitlement and saturation drives, inspections and extensive field visits by officials to tribal villages and habitations.

Health camps, service delivery

and plantation drives will be organised in villages on May 19, while transect walks and public announcements regarding Jan Sunwai grievance hearings will be conducted on May 20. Applications and grievances under the Jan Sunwai programme will be received from May 21 to May 23. From May 19 to May 25, entitlement drives, saturation camps and health outreach activities will be carried out in all identified habitations. As part of the campaign, Circle Officers, BDOs and officials from line departments will undertake village walks to observe real-time grievances, spread awareness on government welfare measures and strengthen engagement with local communities. Several tribal villages across different blocks and village levels will be covered during the observance period to ensure wider outreach, improved service delivery and greater grassroots participation.

## Journalist allegedly kidnapped and assaulted in Lumding Jungle

**HT Correspondent**

**NAGAON, May 18:** A wave of shock and fear spread across Lumding in Hojai district after allegations surfaced of kidnapping and brutal assault on a journalist, Arijit Das of 'Prothom Khobor'.

According to reports, Arijit Das was allegedly abducted late on Sunday night by a group of miscreants and taken in a Swift Dzire vehicle to a remote jungle area, where he was reportedly beaten with iron rods and physically tortured.

Meanwhile, family members informed police after losing contact with him, sources added. It is also claimed that the accused fled after sensing police movement. The injured scribe later managed to contact his family and based on the information provided by them, local police rescued him and launched an investigation.

Significantly, the victim journalist named several alleged accused, including Suman Pal, Ambar Upadhyay, Chandu Dutta, Asim Baidya, Rana Majumdar, Binit Malakar, Rohit Choudhury, Subhajit Dutta and Rahul Chakraborty, along with others.

The incident has triggered major concern over law and order in Lumding. Local residents alleged that people raising voices against illegal activities often face threats and intimidation. Journalist bodies and citizens have demanded a fair investigation and strict legal action against all those involved. Many citizens said that an attack on a journalist is not just an attack on one individual but a serious threat to democracy and freedom of the press.

## Events held statewide marking 1963 introduction of Bodo as a medium of instruction

### 63<sup>rd</sup> Bodo Bijwng Saan celebrated across Assam

**HT Correspondent**

**KOKRAJHAR, May 18:** The 63rd Bodo Bijwng Saan (Bodo Medium Day) was observed on Monday with vibrant celebrations across districts of Assam, commemorating a landmark moment in Bodo educational history.

The Bodo medium was introduced as a medium of instruction on May 18, 1963, to facilitate Bodo-medium education in lower primary schools for citizens in the state and since then the day has been observed annually as Bodo Medium Day.

In Kokrajhar, the Kokrajhar District Committee of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha organised a day-long programme at Salakati to mark the occasion in a befitting manner.

It was on this day, May 18, 1963, that Bodo was declared the medium of instruction in lower primary schools in Bodo-dominated areas of the then undivided Goalpara district by then Chief Minister of Assam Bimala Prasad Chaliha.

The celebration began with the hoisting of the Sabha flag by Bijuel Kumar Ba-



sumatary, president of the Kokrajhar District Bodo Sahitya Sabha, followed by floral tributes to the martyrs of the language movement.

The open session was graced by BTC Executive Member Derhasat Basumatary, noted writer Rupashri Hazoary and several other dignitaries and community leaders.

Bodoland University also organised Bodo Medium Day at its campus, where students, writers and Sahitya Sabha members participated in the programme.

In Chirang, the district committee of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and several primary committees organised Bodo Bijwng Saan at various places and held discussions on the welfare and uplift of Bodo-medium education.

Several district committees of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha across Assam, including Udalguri, Baksa and Karbi Anglong, also conducted day-long programmes to mark the 63-year journey of Bodo-medium education in the state.

General Secretary of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha Nilokanta Goyary extended warm greetings and best wishes to all citizens on the occasion, stating that the day is important to recall the contributions and dedication of Bodo leaders and authors towards the development of Bodo-medium education and literature.

"Today the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and the entire Bodo community celebrated the day with befitting programmes across the state of Assam," he added.

The Government of the Bodoland Territorial Council has announced the observance of "Bodo Bijwng San 2026" on May 18, 2026, marking the historic introduction of the Bodo language as a medium of instruction in schools across Assam.

According to an official notification, all educational institutions and government and semi-government offices under BTC departments have been directed to observe the occasion in a befitting manner, while ensuring that normal functioning of institutions and offices is not affected.

## Two arrested with 19 kg ganja at Titabor Chariali

**HT Correspondent**

**JORHAT, May 18:** Two persons were arrested on Monday at Titabor Chariali in Titabor co-district and about 19 kg of suspected cannabis (ganja) was recovered from their possession.

According to sources, the duo identified as Nipen Das and Riazul Husain, reportedly from the Rajabari area of Jorhat had brought the narcotic substance on the Silchar-Tinsukia Barak Brahmaputra Express, from which they alighted at Titabor Railway Station. The accused persons were caught when they were trying to board a four-wheeler passenger vehicle by a police team that was waiting in advance.

It is to be mentioned that police in Jorhat and across the district have arrested several persons, including women, over the past year on charges of drug peddling. Those arrested include individuals travelling on trains passing through the district.

## Gova Raja's elder brother killed in road accident

**HT Correspondent**

**JAGIROAD, May 18:** Nayan Deoraja, elder brother of Gova Raja of the historic Gova kingdom, Dipsing Deoraja was killed after a speeding Innova vehicle (AS 01 FZ 2237) hit him while he was crossing NH-27 in Jagiroad on Saturday. He was 42 years old.

Police seized the vehicle and arrested the driver following the accident. Gova Raj Parishad secretary Jursing Bardoloi demanded a proper investigation into the incident and strict punishment for those responsible.

## New Nazira MLA felicitated by ATASU

**HT Correspondent**

**SIVASAGAR, May 18:** Mayur Borgohain, the new BJP MLA from the Congress stronghold Nazira was felicitated by ATASU. Basanta Gogoi function on Saturday at the Yuvadal auditorium. Mayur Borgohain defeated Debrat Saikia of the Congress in the 2026 elections in Nazira.

Addressing the large gathering, Mayur Borgohain said he was overwhelmed by the love shown by the members of the organisation he once led from the front. He said that he would continue to serve the Ahom community as well as all others equally as an elected member of the present government.

Basanta Gogoi, president of ATASU, said that two members of the BJP government in the state, Mayur Borgohain and Chakra Gogoi of Mahmorah LAC are from the ATASU family and he hoped that they would continue to fight for the Ahom community from the floor of the State Assembly.

## QUOTE OF THE DAY

'Success is not final; failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts.' — Winston Churchill

## Trump-XI summit in Beijing

Now that the US President Donald Trump is back in Washington DC. After his two-day summit talks in Beijing on May 14 and 15, it is appropriate to decode the gains of the summit. There were four major issues— Taiwan, Iran war, trade deals and facilitating more business for the American high-tech companies focusing on AI. What then was the final outcome of the Beijing summit on these issues? To start with, it should be mentioned that both world leaders met in the Chinese capital under differing circumstances. While President Trump was under tremendous pressure to show results to his domestic MAGA base, President Xi Jinping had no such compulsions. He took a long term view and was not in any hurry to clinch any deal under pressure. At the same time, he also acted to ensure that the global politics remains more favourable for China's advancement to become a more powerful economy and that can be possible only with the cooperation from the U.S. President. If an analysis is made of the official Chinese media, it is seen that the Chinese side sees the Beijing summit as the new positioning of U.S.-China relations representing a recalibration of each side's goals and modes of interaction under new circumstances.

These are all high-sounding words of policy nature without specifically mentioning what China agreed to offer to Trump or what was China's actual gains. But through the tone and terming the Summit outcome as historic, the Chinese side is more emphasizing on the long-term possibilities of a better bilateral relationship. President Trump is facing mid-term polls in America in November this year. Less than six months are left. He has to show to the electorate that he is a winner. Xi is leading a one-party government. He has no need for such showmanship. As against the Chinese position mostly based on long term prospects, the US side reaction was mostly from Trump through his interviews in his plane on the way to Washington. As usual, the comments were in superlatives in his usual style like fantastic. Trump also said that he and Xi had settled some of the issues which no other US leader could have done.

Now after his return, stories are coming out in US media that Trump is going for major action against Iran if Iran does not agree to the peace formula, and are all worried. Trump is not in a position to start a full scale war against Iran again. He is still depending on China to help him in baling out of the Iran mess which he himself created. President Putin also is in touch with President Xi and they are both working on a compromise solution to ensure that both the US and Iran can project themselves as winners to their respective citizens.

## Indian Economy facing serious inflationary pressures due to Iran war

By: Dr Gyan Pathak

Though the April retail inflation based on Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose only a little to 3.48 per cent from the March inflation 3.40, and year on year food inflation based on Consumer Food Price Index to 4.20 per cent from 3.87, which is still within the tolerable limit of 2-6 per cent, situation is likely to change for the worse within weeks. Wholesale inflation is rising sharply, and it will soon go beyond the ability and capacity of the Union government to prevent passing it to the consumers, which it has been doing in the last three months, chiefly on account of the elections in states.

The wholesale inflation for all commodities in February 2026 on year on year basis was only 2.6 per cent. However, after the Israel and US aggression on Iran, it went up to 3.88 per cent and in April 8.30 per cent. The data for April is provisional and it is over the April 2025 data. The wholesale inflation of primary articles was 3.21 per cent in February 2026, which rose to 6.36 per cent in March, and 9.17 per cent in April.

The sharpest rise in wholesale inflation was noticed in fuel and power. There was actually deflation of (-)3.85 per cent in February 2026, but it turned into inflation of 1.05 per cent in March, and jumped to 24.71 per cent in April. For manufactured products, the wholesale inflation in February was 3.13 per cent which rose to 3.39 per cent in March and 4.62 per cent in April.

The wholesale food inflation was 1.85 per cent in February 2026, which remained that the same level in March and rose to 2.31 per cent.

The month on month change in WPI index shows that rise has been very sharp. Just in the beginning of the year in January 2026, the change in WPI for all commodities was just 0.25 per cent, that has rose to 1.53 per cent in March and 3.86 per cent in April.

For primary articles month on month change in WPI in January 2026 was in negative just at (-)0.10 per cent, which sharply rose to 2.33 per cent in March, and 2.58 per cent in April. The Price of crude petroleum & natural gas (16.42%), food articles (1.41%) and minerals (0.91%) increased in April 2026 compared to March 2026. The Price of non-food articles (-0.94%) decreased in April 2026 compared to March 2026. For fuel and power, the month on month WPI was (-)1.62 per cent which rose to 1.10 per cent in February, 4.20 per cent in March, and 18.22 per cent in April. The Price of mineral oils (29.37%) increased in April 2026 compared to March 2026. The Price of electricity (-2.53%) decreased in April 2026 compared to March 2026.

For manufactured products, the month on month WPI change was 0.82 per cent in January which rose to 1.40 per cent in April. Out of the 22 NIC two-digit groups for manufactured products, 21 groups witnessed an increase in prices and 1 group witnessed a decrease in prices. Some of the important groups that showed month-over-month increase in prices were manufacture of basic metals; chemicals and chemical products; textiles; food products and machinery and equipment etc. The group that witnessed a month-over-month decrease in price in April 2026 was other manufacturing. And for food, it has risen to 1.19 per cent in April from (-)0.77 per cent in January 2026. The rate of inflation (Y-o-Y) based on WPI Food Index increased from 1.85% in March 2026 to 2.31% in April 2026.

The wholesale inflation rate for all commodities rose from 0.85 per cent in April 2025 to 8.30 per cent in April 2026; milk from 1.8 per cent to 2.56 per cent; Eggs, Meat and Fish from (-)0.29 per cent to 6.68 per cent. Among non-food article oil seeds wholesale inflation rose from 1.95 per cent in April 2025 to 22.24 per cent in April 2026. For all non-food article it rose from 1.52 per cent to 12.18 per cent during this period.

Wholesale inflation in minerals was 1.29 per cent in April 2025 which rose to 12.15 per cent in April 2026. Sharpest rise was in crude petroleum and natural gas, which rose from (-)15.55 per cent in April 2025 to 67.18 per cent in April 2026. As for crude petroleum it was even sharper from (-)19.85 per cent to 88.06 per cent.

During this period wholesale inflation of fuel and power rose from (-)3.76 to 24.71, LPG from (-)0.41 per cent to 10.92 per cent, Petrol from (-)7.70 per cent to 32.24 per cent, and high speed diesel from (-)5.04 per cent to 25.19 per cent. (IPA Service)

# Cyber Crime and the safe use of the internet

Present times have made our daily lives completely dependent on information technology and networks. From waking up in the morning until going to bed at night, we remain connected to the world every moment through mobile phones or computers. Although we have accepted this mechanization very casually, the dangers hidden behind it have become equally terrifying. While the digital revolution has taken our social system forward, alongside it a new world of crime called cyber crime has emerged, standing as a major challenge before human society. These criminals have no fixed boundaries and they can target a person sitting inside his own house from any corner of the world. From our personal information to the hard-earned money kept in banks, everything now faces the growing possibility of falling into the hands of invisible criminals. These crimes committed through the internet not only cause financial losses, but also deeply affect the mental and social lives of people. Therefore, in today's age, merely knowing how to use the internet is not enough; it has become extremely necessary to possess deep knowledge about how this medium can be used safely.

The nature and methods of cyber crimes are highly complex and strategic, and which ordinary people often fail to understand easily. Generally, cyber crime begins with the act of collecting highly confidential information from a person by misleading him with false statements or tempting offers. Many people think cyber crime only means stealing money from bank accounts, but its scope is much broader. It includes stealing another person's identity, spreading obscene pictures or videos, mentally harassing someone through the internet, inserting harmful software into computers or mobile phones and damaging the devices, among many others. Criminals are always searching for opportunities to exploit human weaknesses. Sometimes messages arrive claiming lottery winnings, while at other times people are threatened that their bank accounts will be blocked, through which criminals obtain their confidential numbers or passwords. Especially young children and senior citizens become easy targets of such networks because their awareness regarding these matters is comparatively less. As technology has advanced, newer methods of committing crimes have also become more sophisticated, and to fight against them we too must expand the boundaries of our knowledge.

At present, financial fraud has become the most discussed and widespread aspect of cyber crime. Nowadays people prefer online transactions over cash dealings, but along with this the possibility of danger has also

increased manifold. Fraudsters impersonate bank officials over phone calls and convince customers that their cards have expired or that some urgent banking procedure is required. By trapping people in such webs of conversation, they obtain a special number sent to the customer's mobile phone, commonly known as OTP. The moment they get that number, the entire money from the account is withdrawn within seconds. Not only through phone calls, but nowadays messages are also sent through various social media platforms by using the names of friends or relatives to urgently ask for money. Clicking on any unknown link for any reason may transfer complete control of your mobile phone to someone else. For financial security, one must always remember that no bank ever asks customers for personal passwords or confidential numbers over phone calls. One should never fall for temptations such as becoming rich quickly or winning lotteries, because in most cases such things are false and part of fraudulent traps.

The issue of social media usage and the insecurity arising from it should also be considered seriously. We very easily upload our photos, addresses and family information on platforms like Facebook, Instagram and

others. However, criminals can use this information to create fake identities in our names and deceive others. This is known as identity theft. Especially targeting girls and women, many times their photographs are distorted and they are blackmailed by threatening to circulate them on the internet. Before building friendships with someone on social media, it is necessary to know properly about that person. One should think many times before accepting friend requests from unknown individuals. Moreover, by sharing our location on social media, criminals can accurately determine when we are at home or away from home. Therefore, refraining from making every aspect of our personal lives public is the wisest choice. To protect the privacy of personal information, we should properly use the security systems or privacy settings of social media so that our information becomes visible only to the people we choose.

Cyber bullying or the act of harassing someone through the internet has created extremely negative impacts on the younger generation today. Young boys and girls often become victims of such mental torture at the hands of their classmates in schools or colleges. Spreading false propaganda about someone, using obscene abuses or attempting to mentally break a person are all included under cyber crimes. Many people believe that by using fake names or identi-

ties on the internet, they can say anything without being caught. However, according to information technology laws, every activity leaves behind a digital trace through which the police can identify criminals. Teenagers who become victims of cyber bullying often hesitate to tell anyone about it due to shame or fear, as a result of which they suffer from deep mental depression and sometimes even take extreme decisions like suicide.

Therefore, parents and teachers should closely observe the behavior of children and maintain friendly relationships with them so that they can openly speak about any problem. It is extremely important to teach them to accept the internet not merely as a medium of entertainment, but as a responsible platform.

The security aspects of software and various applications used on computers or smartphones are also extremely important. Many times we download any free games or unauthorized software available on the internet. Such software may contain viruses or malware that secretly steal all confidential data from our phones and send them to servers. Many applications are even capable of using our mobile phone cameras or microphones without our knowledge. Therefore, before downloading any application, it is necessary to verify how reliable it is and what permissions it seeks from us. Downloading or installing software from sources other than official stores can be dangerous. Moreover, our devices should always have a high-quality antivirus software installed. Operating systems should be updated regularly because every update fixes newly discovered security loopholes. If we remain unaware, then the very modern device in our hands may become capable of spying on us, which can create a terrifying situation.

To work safely through the internet, we must exercise special caution regarding the use of passwords. Most people use simple passwords such as their names, birth dates or combinations like 1-2-3-4, which criminals can easily guess. A strong password should always contain a combination of letters, numbers and special symbols. Using different passwords for different accounts is the best policy because even if one account gets hacked, the others will remain safe. Besides this, activating the system of 'two-factor authentication' has become extremely necessary today. Through this, even if someone learns your password, he still cannot open your account without the specific code sent to your mobile phone. This additional layer of security protects us from many dangers. Conducting banking transactions through public Wi-Fi or internet services available in public places is absolutely inappropriate because the possibility of information theft remains extremely high in such networks.

There is also a need for awareness in our society regarding information technology

laws and their implementation. In our country, strict punishment provisions against cyber crimes exist under the Information Technology Act, 2000. If you become a victim of any cyber crime, you should immediately file a complaint with the police instead of hiding it.

Nowadays every district has cyber crime police stations, and the government has also arranged special portals for filing online complaints. In cases of financial fraud, if reports are made within the first one or two hours, the chances of recovering the money become much higher. The government helpline number 1930 should always be remembered. Many people hide such incidents due to social fear or to avoid police procedures, as a result of which criminals become encouraged and continue searching for new victims. One must remember that only when a criminal is punished does the right message spread through society and others fear committing similar crimes. Therefore, seeking legal assistance falls within our responsibility and duty.

For the safe use of the internet, along with personal awareness there is also a need for collective consciousness. Workshops on cyber security should be organized in schools, colleges and various social organizations. People in rural areas especially should be made aware of these issues because compared to urban residents, they are more likely to make mistakes in digital transactions. Digital literacy does not merely mean knowing how to use mobile phones; it means recognizing the dangers behind them and possessing the ability to resist them. As we become increasingly dependent on digital media, our responsibilities too continue to grow. A small mistake or a single careless click can make our entire lives miserable. Therefore, following the principle that "prevention is the best solution," we should always remain alert. By keeping our eyes and ears open and adopting modern security measures, we can properly use a powerful medium like the internet for our progress.

Finally, it can be said that technology can become a blessing for us if we use it with wisdom and caution. No matter how many new strategies cyber criminals adopt, our awareness remains the strongest weapon against them. Avoiding the temptations of unknown people, keeping personal information confidential and immediately informing the authorities about any suspicious activities are the duties of a responsible citizen. Digital security is not only the responsibility of the government or the police; it is an essential responsibility of each one of us. Only when we keep ourselves secure and inspire others to remain secure as well can we build a beautiful and crime-free digital society. The use of information technology will continue to increase in the coming days, and therefore developing habits of safe internet usage from now onwards is truly the demand of the time.

## UCC: Balancing Equality, Diversity, and India's Constitutional Morality

By: Dipak Kurmi

The discourse surrounding the Uniform Civil Code in India represents one of the most enduring, legally intricate, and politically sensitive debates in the nation's post-independence history. At its core, the concept of a Uniform Civil Code envisions a common set of civil laws governing all citizens of India, completely irrespective of their religious affiliations, in deeply personal and familial matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption, and succession. Currently, India operates under a framework of plural personal laws, where different religious communities are governed by their respective customs, traditions, and distinct statutory enactments. The foundational philosophy behind the proposal for a uniform code is to systematically replace this fragmented legal diversity with a singular, cohesive legal framework designed to ensure absolute equality before the law and to foster a deeper sense of national integration. By standardizing civil relations, the code aims to bridge the historical fissures created by separate personal laws, thereby aligning the private spheres of citizens with the democratic ideals of a modern, secular nation-state.

To fully understand the contemporary debate, one must trace its origins to the constitutional architecture of India, specifically within Article 44 of the Constitution. This article explicitly dictates that the State shall endeavor to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India. Crucially, Article 44 finds its place within Part IV of the Constitution, which outlines the Directive Principles of State Policy. Because these principles are non-justiciable, they are not enforceable by courts of law, serving instead as fundamental guiding principles for governance and future lawmaking. The inclusion of the code within this specific section reflects a profound constitutional vision of legal uniformity, secularism, and progressive social reform, balanced against the realities of a deeply divided society at the time of independence. This aspiration, however, exists in a delicate, continuous tension with Articles 25 through 28 of the Constitution, which guarantee

the fundamental right to freedom of religion and conscience, thereby creating a complex legal tightrope between state-led social reform and the preservation of individual and communal religious rights.

The historical trajectory of this legal debate is rooted firmly in both the colonial past and the intensive deliberations of the builders of modern India. During the pre-independence era, the British administration grappled with the complexities of Indian society, as evidenced by the Lex Loci Report of 1840. While this landmark report strongly recommended uniformity in the codification of Indian laws, it deliberately and explicitly excluded personal laws from its purview. The British colonial authorities adopted a calculated policy of non-interference in religious and personal matters, a strategy primarily aimed at maintaining social order and avoiding backlash from local communities, which ultimately left the diverse personal laws untouched and legally entrenched. Decades later, during the historic Constituent Assembly Debates spanning from 1946 to 1950, the issue resurfaced with intense fervor. Visionary leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar strongly supported the implementation of a uniform code, viewing it as an indispensable tool for systemic social reform, the eradication of caste and gender inequities, and the modernization of Indian society. However, facing fierce and sustained opposition from various minority groups who feared the erasure of their cultural identities, the assembly compromised by placing the code under the non-enforceable Directive Principles rather than categorizing it as a fundamental right.

In the years following independence, the legislative approach toward personal laws remained fragmented rather than comprehensive. In the mid-1950s, the Indian parliament enacted the Hindu Code Bills, a series of legislative reforms that systematically codified and modernized Hindu personal laws regarding marriage, succession, and guardianship, yet these sweeping reforms did not extend to Muslim, Christian, or Parsi communities. Consequently, the Goa Civil Code, a legacy of Portuguese colonial rule that remained intact after the terri-

tor's liberation, stands today as the solitary example of a near-uniform civil system operating within an Indian state. The broader objective of implementing a nationwide civil code remains focused on ensuring absolute legal equality among all citizens, aggressively promoting gender justice by dismantling patriarchal biases inherent in various personal laws, strengthening national integration by uniting citizens under a singular legal identity, and simplifying as well as modernizing the notoriously complex and contradictory web of existing personal laws.

The arguments in favor of establishing a uniform code are anchored in the principles of constitutional egalitarianism and social modernization. Foremost among these advantages is the realization of true equality before the law, ensuring that every citizen is governed by the identical legal standards regardless of their faith, which directly upholds the spirit of Article 14 of the Constitution. Furthermore, the push for a common code is seen as an essential crusade for gender justice, as many traditional personal laws across different faiths contain inherently discriminatory provisions regarding alimony, polygamy, and unequal inheritance rights that compromise the dignity of women. By establishing uniform statutes, the state can guarantee gender parity and protect vulnerable individuals from archaic communal practices. Beyond individual rights, a common code fosters national integration by cultivating a shared civic consciousness that transcends divisive religious identities. It also promises a massive simplification of the legal system, eliminating the confusion, prolonged litigation, and administrative delays caused by overlapping personal laws, while simultaneously reinforcing the core tenet of secularism by separating religious dogma from the secular legal administration of a modern democratic state.

Conversely, the challenges and disadvantages associated with the imposition of a uniform code are deeply rooted in the preservation of minority rights and cultural autonomy. Critics and community leaders argue that a mandatory uniform code represents a direct threat to religious freedom, potentially infringing upon the cultural rights protected

under Articles 25 through 28, which grant communities the right to manage their own religious and cultural affairs. The sheer, staggering diversity of Indian society, with its countless regional customs, distinct tribal laws, and varied religious practices, makes the formulation of a single, universally acceptable law an extraordinarily difficult task. There is also a widespread, deep-seated concern among minority communities that a uniform code might inadvertently reflect majoritarian values, thereby systematically undermining and erasing ancient minority traditions and distinct ways of life. Moreover, the entire issue is perpetually fraught with intense political sensitivity, frequently becoming highly politicized during elections, which severely impedes the formation of a genuine, democratic consensus across the ideological and communal spectrum.

The practical implementation of such a sweeping legal reform faces monumental hurdles across multiple dimensions of Indian governance. On the legal front, courts and lawmakers must navigate the direct conflict between fundamental religious rights and the directive principles of state policy, a task requiring extensive, meticulous legislative reforms. Socially, the resistance is formidable, driven by deep-rooted customs, centuries-old religious beliefs, and a profound psychological fear of a loss of community identity among minority groups. The federal structure of India adds another layer of administrative complexity, as personal laws fall under the Concurrent List of the Seventh Schedule, meaning both the central government and individual states possess the authority to legislate on these matters, necessitating an extraordinary degree of political coordination. This complexity is further exacerbated by the absolute absence of a universally acceptable draft code, leaving stakeholders to debate an abstract concept rather than a concrete piece of legislation, while governments often hesitate to take decisive action due to volatile vote-bank politics and electoral risks.

The judiciary has played an instrumental role in shaping the evolution of this discourse, frequently prodding the legislature to take action while respecting the separation

of powers. In landmark judgments over the decades, such as the Shah Bano case of 1985 and the Sarla Mudgal case of 1995, the Supreme Court of India has repeatedly stressed the necessity of a uniform civil code to eliminate gender discrimination, eradicate contradictions between conflicting personal laws, and strengthen the fabric of constitutional morality. The courts have consistently observed that the absence of a uniform law leaves many women without adequate financial security or legal recourse following the dissolution of marriage. Nevertheless, even while advocating for reform, the judiciary has maintained a strict constitutional boundary, affirming that the actual drafting and implementation of a uniform code falls entirely within the domain of the legislature, as it requires political consensus and comprehensive lawmaking that courts cannot directly enforce.

In contemporary times, the debate has shifted from purely theoretical legal arguments to concrete legislative actions at the state level. The state of Uttarakhand recently became a focal point of national attention by enacting its own Uniform Civil Code, signaling a gradual, decentralized shift toward legal uniformity through state-level initiatives. While proponents view this as a progressive milestone and a testing ground for a future national framework, the move has triggered intense national debates regarding individual privacy, social acceptance, and the legal feasibility of states implementing such laws independently. This regional development underscores the reality that while the code remains a progressive constitutional ideal capable of balancing equality, secularism, and social reform, its successful nationwide implementation requires a highly gradual, consultative approach that deeply respects cultural diversity and prioritizes consensus over imposition. Ultimately, the true success of a Uniform Civil Code in India lies not in the rigid enforcement of uniformity alone, but in the delicate, empathetic art of harmonizing the nation's magnificent diversity with the uncompromising principles of constitutional morality.

(The writer can be reached at dipakkurmipltd@gmail.com)

# India's First seizure of Jihadi drug Captagon is a Ominous Sign of new threat

By T N Ashok

India's first seizure of Captagon — the notorious "jihadi drug" of the Syrian conflict — is more than a sensational narcotics bust. It is a warning flare. Beneath the ₹182-crore seizure at Mundra Port and Delhi lies a far darker story: the merging of global terror finance, synthetic narcotics, organised crime and a new transnational drug economy that increasingly sees India not merely as a transit point, but as a strategic battleground.

For years, Captagon belonged to the grim geography of West Asia — a pill swallowed by fighters in ruined Syrian cities, trafficked through Gulf routes, and whispered about by intelligence agencies tracking extremist networks. Now it has arrived on Indian soil.

The Narcotics Control Bureau's "Operation Ragepill" uncovered over 227 kilograms of Captagon allegedly destined for the Middle East, leading to the arrest of a Syrian national and exposing what officials believe is an international smuggling network operating through maritime cargo routes.

Yet Captagon is only one face of a much larger catastrophe. Behind it looms fentanyl — the synthetic opioid that has become America's deadliest drug epidemic, reportedly killing around 100,000 people annually in recent years and devastating entire communities across the United States.

The two drugs are different in chemistry but connected in consequence. Captagon fuels aggression and wakefulness; fentanyl suppresses breathing and kills silently. One emerged from war zones. The other exploded through pharmaceutical abuse and cartel trafficking. Together, they represent the terrifying evolution of synthetic narcotics: cheap to make, easy to smuggle, enormously profitable and capable of destroying societies faster than governments can legislate against them.

Captagon began life re-

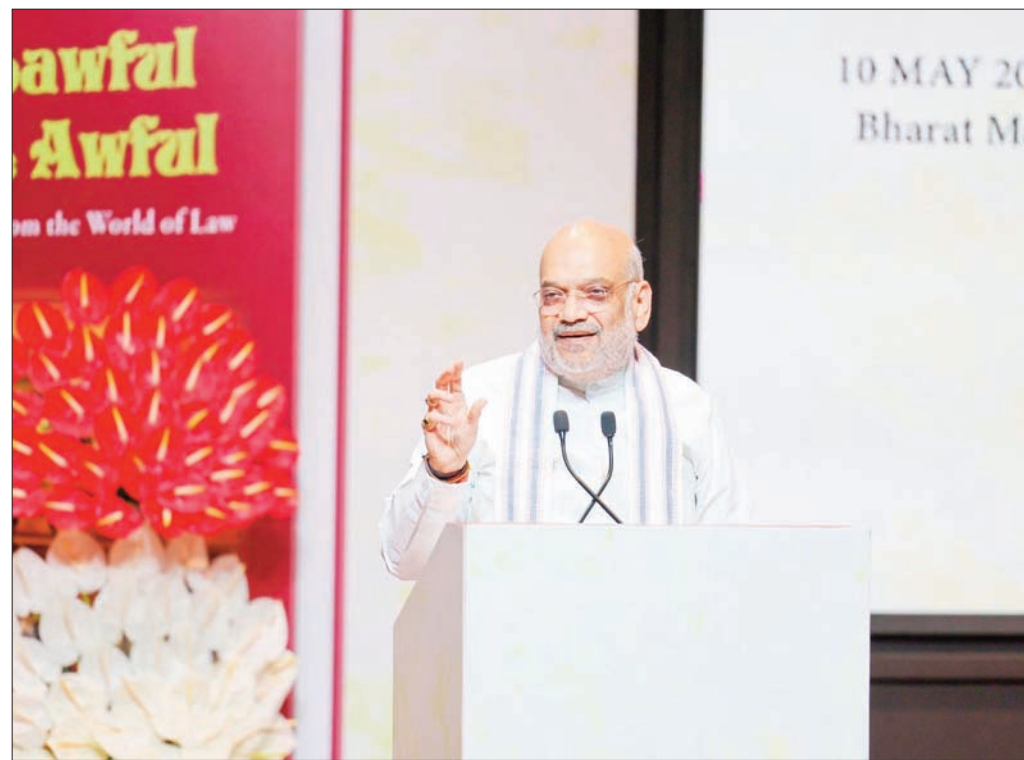
spectably enough. Developed in the 1960s as Fenethylamine, it was prescribed for narcolepsy and attention disorders before its addictive properties led to global bans in the 1980s. What survives today under the Captagon label is usually an illicit cocktail of amphetamines, caffeine and methamphetamine manufactured in clandestine laboratories.

Its reputation was forged during the Syrian civil war. Fighters reportedly used it to suppress exhaustion, fear and hunger while sustaining prolonged combat activity. Intelligence reports linked its trafficking to extremist and militant groups operating in the region. That association earned it the chilling nickname: the "jihadi drug".

The economics are straightforward. Captagon is cheap to produce, easy to conceal and enormously profitable. International investigators say the trade now spans maritime smuggling, forged documentation, hawala financing and sophisticated transnational criminal networks. India's seizure matters because it reveals how these routes are shifting eastward.

For decades, India's narcotics concerns centred around heroin from Afghanistan and the Golden Crescent. Today, synthetic drugs are replacing traditional narcotics. Ports, courier systems and chemical supply chains have become the new frontlines. Security officials fear India may increasingly be used as both a transit corridor and a chemical sourcing hub for global synthetic drug syndicates.

If Captagon represents the narcotics of war, fentanyl represents the narcotics of collapse. Originally developed as a powerful medical painkiller, fentanyl is up to 50 times stronger than heroin and vastly more lethal in tiny doses. Illicit fentanyl now dominates America's opioid epidemic. Synthetic opioids — primarily fentanyl — have caused tens of thousands of overdose deaths annually in the United States, transforming the country's public



health crisis into a national emergency.

What makes fentanyl uniquely terrifying is its scale and economics. A tiny quantity can produce thousands of doses. It can be mixed into heroin, cocaine or counterfeit prescription pills with catastrophic consequences. Users frequently do not even know they are consuming it. The result is mass death.

Entire American towns have been hollowed out by overdoses. Emergency responders routinely carry naloxone kits. Public parks, railway stations and suburban streets alike have become scenes of collapse. Fentanyl is no longer merely a narcotics issue in America; it is a social disintegration crisis. And increasingly, the supply chain stretches across continents.

For years, Washington accused Chinese chemical suppliers of exporting fentanyl and precursor compounds used by Mexican cartels to manufacture the drug. Bei-

jing denied state involvement but eventually tightened controls, placing all fentanyl-class substances under regulation in 2019 and later expanding restrictions on precursor chemicals.

China's crackdown was significant but incomplete. Experts say traffickers adapted quickly, shifting production routes, exploiting legal loopholes and rerouting precursor chemicals through intermediary networks.

India, meanwhile, emerged under increasing international scrutiny as a source of pharmaceutical chemicals and precursor compounds. Indian pharmaceutical manufacturing is enormous and largely legitimate, but the same chemical infrastructure can be exploited by rogue operators and unlicensed laboratories.

Indian authorities have intensified enforcement in recent years. The Narcotics Control Bureau has sharply increased seizures of synthetic narcotics, while customs

and intelligence agencies have expanded surveillance at ports and courier hubs. According to official figures cited by government sources, Indian agencies seized more than 1.33 lakh kilograms of narcotic substances in 2025 alone.

The government has also pushed a broader "Drug-Free India" strategy involving stricter monitoring of chemical shipments, tighter port surveillance and international cooperation with agencies in Europe, the Gulf and North America. But enforcement experts privately acknowledge a difficult truth: synthetic narcotics evolve faster than law enforcement systems.

India's principal anti-drug framework — the NDPS Act of 1985 — was designed in a different era, one dominated by cannabis, heroin and opium trafficking. Synthetic drugs have transformed the challenge entirely.

Today's narcotics economy re-

lies on: precursor chemicals, encrypted communications, darknet marketplaces, cryptocurrency payments, micro-laboratories, maritime container smuggling, and international courier systems.

Current laws often struggle to keep pace with constantly changing chemical formulas. Traffickers simply alter molecular structures faster than governments can classify them as illegal. China faced similar problems before introducing broader class-wide fentanyl regulations instead of banning substances one by one. Even then, enforcement remains uneven because chemical industries are vast and supply chains deeply interconnected. India may eventually require comparable reforms.

Experts increasingly argue for: stronger precursor chemical tracking, mandatory digital monitoring of bulk pharmaceutical compounds, enhanced scrutiny of unlicensed chemists, specialised maritime narcotics intelligence units, harsher penalties for synthetic drug trafficking, and integrated coordination between customs, cybercrime and anti-terror agencies. There is also a growing case for a dedicated synthetic narcotics law rather than relying solely on frameworks built for older drug networks.

What makes Captagon and fentanyl especially dangerous is that they sit at the intersection of crime, geopolitics and terrorism. Captagon profits have reportedly financed armed networks in conflict regions. Fentanyl profits enrich Mexican cartels powerful enough to destabilise border regions. Both depend on globalised supply chains involving chemicals, shipping routes and financial laundering networks.

In this new narco-economy, geography barely matters. A precursor may originate in Asia, move through the Gulf, be processed in Mexico, sold on an American street and paid for through cryptocurrency routed across Europe.

India's role in this matrix is

changing rapidly. With its massive pharmaceutical industry, expanding ports and strategic maritime location, the country faces growing risks of becoming both a transit corridor and a target market. And that may be the deepest concern behind the Captagon seizure.

India has long believed that synthetic drug catastrophes belonged elsewhere — fentanyl in America, Captagon in Syria, methamphetamine in Southeast Asia. That illusion is fading. The arrival of Captagon suggests that global narcotics syndicates now view India as part of the same interconnected map.

Ultimately, the greatest fear is not merely terrorism or smuggling. It is social corrosion. Synthetic narcotics spread rapidly because they are cheap, portable and psychologically devastating. They target the young first — students, unemployed youth, nightlife consumers, vulnerable urban populations.

India has already witnessed alarming increases in synthetic drug use in metropolitan regions, university circuits and border states. The shift from plant-based narcotics to laboratory-made chemicals means addiction can spread faster and treatment becomes harder.

Captagon may not become India's fentanyl. But the lesson from America is brutal: once synthetic narcotics establish mass demand, governments struggle for decades to regain control. The United States, with all its enforcement power and medical infrastructure, still finds itself overwhelmed by fentanyl deaths. China continues tightening controls. India is stepping up seizures and international coordination. Yet traffickers adapt with frightening speed.

That is the central truth of the synthetic drug age: unlike traditional narcotics, these poisons are limited not by agriculture, climate or geography, but only by chemistry. And chemistry travels everywhere. (IPA Service)

## When power consolidates: Why a strong Opposition matters in Assam's democracy

By: Mowsam Hazarika

The results of the latest Assam Legislative Assembly elections have delivered a decisive and historic mandate. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has secured an emphatic victory, winning 102 out of 126 seats and returning to power for a third consecutive term. The BJP alone has crossed the majority mark with 82 seats, marking a significant expansion from its previous tally. Its allies—the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the Bodoland People's Front (BPF)—have further strengthened the alliance's dominance.

On the other side of the political spectrum, the outcome has been sobering. The Congress has seen its representation shrink to 19 seats, while regional players like Rajbor Dal have made limited inroads, and others like the Asom Jatiya Parishad (AJP) and the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) have failed to make an impact. The All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), once a significant force, has been reduced to just two seats.

While electoral victories and defeats are intrinsic to democracy, such an overwhelming concentration of power raises important questions about the health and future of democratic functioning in Assam. At the heart of this concern lies the role and necessity of a strong, vibrant, and effective opposition.

**The Essence of Opposition in a Democracy**  
Democracy is not merely about elections and the formation of governments; it is about continuous accountability, debate, and representation. Opposition parties are not adversaries of governance but essential pillars of democratic structure. They provide checks and balances, question executive decisions, and ensure that governance remains transparent and responsive.

**Assam's Political Landscape: A Shifting Balance**  
The current electoral verdict reflects not just the popularity or organisational strength of the ruling alliance but also the fragmentation and strategic limitations of the opposition. The inability of opposition parties to present a united and coherent alternative has contributed significantly to the scale of the NDA's victory.

In regions like Upper Assam, where the NDA swept nearly all seats except Bisagar, the absence of a consolidated opposition narrative was evident. Even where opposition leaders like Akhil Gogoi secured victories, these remained isolated successes rather than part of a broader political momentum.

This fragmentation has implications beyond electoral arithmetic. It affects the ability of the opposition to function effectively within the Assembly, where numerical strength often determines the capacity to influence debates, form committees, and hold the government accountable.

**Risks of a Weak Opposition**  
A diminished opposition can lead to several democratic concerns:

**1. Reduced Legislative Scrutiny:**  
With limited numbers, opposition members may struggle to effectively challenge or amend legislation. Important bills may pass without rigorous debate, reducing the quality of lawmaking.

**2. Erosion of Accountability:**  
Governments function best when they are under constant scrutiny. A weak opposition reduces the pressure on the ruling party to justify its decisions, potentially leading to complacency or overreach.

### 3. Marginalisation of Alternative Voices:

Assam is a state marked by diversity—ethnic, linguistic, and regional. Opposition parties often act as representatives of these varied voices. Their voices can lead to underrepresentation of certain communities and concerns.

**4. Decline in Democratic Engagement:**  
A one-sided political landscape can discourage public participation and debate. Democracy thrives on contestation, and the absence of a credible opposition can lead to political apathy.

**The Responsibility of the Opposition**  
The current scenario also presents an opportunity for introspection among opposition parties. Electoral setbacks, while discouraging, can serve as catalysts for renewal and reform.

**To regain relevance and effectiveness, opposition forces in Assam must address several key challenges:**

**1. Unity and Strategic Coordination:**  
Fragmentation has been a major weakness. Building alliances based on shared principles rather than short-term electoral calculations is crucial.

**2. Grassroots Engagement:**  
Reconnecting with the electorate at the grassroots level is essential. Understanding local issues and building sustained relationships with communities can help rebuild trust.

**3. Credible Leadership and Vision:**  
Opposition parties need to project clear leadership and articulate a compelling alternative vision for the state's development.

**4. Issue-Based Politics:**  
Focusing on real issues—employment, agriculture, education, health, and regional disparities—can help opposition parties regain public confidence.

**The Role of Civil Society and Media**  
In situations where the opposition is numerically weak, the role of civil society, independent media, and public institutions becomes even more critical. They must act as watchdogs, ensuring that governance remains transparent and accountable.

An informed and active citizenry can also compensate, to some extent, for the absence of formal opposition structures. Public discourse, social movements, and civic engagement are integral components of a healthy democracy.

**A Test for the Ruling Alliance**  
While much attention is rightly focused on the opposition, the responsibility of maintaining democratic balance also lies with the ruling alliance. A strong mandate should not translate into majoritarianism but into responsible and inclusive governance.

The government must ensure that dissent is respected, opposition voices are heard, and democratic institutions are strengthened rather than weakened. True leadership lies not just in winning elections but in governing with humility and accountability.

**Looking Ahead**  
Assam stands at a significant political juncture. The scale of the NDA's victory reflects a clear public mandate, but it also underscores the urgent need for a reunion of democratic forces.

A vibrant opposition is not a threat to governance; it is its most important safeguard. For democracy to thrive, power must be balanced by accountability, and authority must be complemented by dissent.

The latest election verdict, therefore, should not be seen merely as a political outcome but as a reminder of the responsibilities that lie ahead—for the ruling alliance, the opposition, and the people of Assam.

In the final analysis, the strength of a democracy is measured not by the dominance of its Government but by the vitality of its opposition. Assam's future will depend on how well this balance is restored and sustained in the years to come.

## Trump's Taiwan policy faces threat as his advisers warn of Chinese aggression

By: Ashok Nilakantan Avers

The island that the world refuses to recognise as a country has once again been reminded of a brutal geopolitical truth: in the contest between the United States and China, Taiwan is indispensable — but still expendable.

When President Donald Trump emerged from his carefully choreographed summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing last week, Taiwan listened nervously. Then came the line that sent tremors through Taipei.

"I'm not looking to have somebody go independent," Trump said, referring to Taiwan. "I want them to cool down. I want China to cool down." In one sentence, the American president revived every Taiwanese fear that Washington's security promises may ultimately stop short of military sacrifice.

Within hours, Taiwan struck back diplomatically. President Lai Ching-te's office insisted that Taiwan was already "a sovereign, independent democratic country". Taipei reaffirmed its commitment to the status quo — no declaration of independence, no union with China — but the message underneath was unmistakable: Taiwan will not allow Washington or Beijing to define its identity.

Behind the diplomatic language lies an increasingly dangerous strategic reality. Taiwan now sits at the centre of the most combustible confrontation on earth: a three-way collision involving Chinese nationalism, American military credibility, and Taiwan's determination to survive as a de facto nation. For many Taiwanese, Trump's remarks felt less like reassurance and more like betrayal.

For decades, the United States has poured billions into Taiwan's defence, economy and strategic survival. Washington has armed the island, protected its sea lanes, integrated its semiconductor industry into the Western technological ecosystem and repeatedly warned Beijing against invasion. Yet after all that support, America still refuses formally to recognise Taiwan as an independent state.

The contradiction has always been deliberate. Officially, Washington follows the "One China" policy, recognising Beijing as the sole legal government of China while merely acknowledging — not endorsing — Beijing's claim over Taiwan. It is one of the great diplomatic ambiguities of modern geopolitics: America protects Taiwan militarily while diplomatically pretending it is not a country. Taiwanese leaders understand the game. But Trump's bluntness has exposed the limits of American commitment more starkly than any US president in years. The numbers explain why Taiwan matters so profoundly to Washington.

Economically, Taiwan is no ordinary island. It is the beating heart of the global semiconductor industry. The island produces over 60% of the world's advanced chips and more than 90% of the most sophisticated semiconductors through companies such as Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company. Without Taiwan, everything from American fighter jets to iPhones to artificial intelligence systems would face catastrophic disruption.

US investment in Taiwan has risen sharply in recent years, especially in high technology, semiconductors and defence-linked sectors. Tai-

wanese investment into the United States, meanwhile, has exploded. TSMC alone has committed more than \$65 billion to chip manufacturing plants in Arizona — one of the largest foreign investments in American industrial history.

Yet these figures remain tiny compared with America's colossal economic relationship with China. Despite years of tariffs, sanctions and strategic hostility, annual US-China trade still exceeds half a trillion dollars. American companies remain deeply embedded in Chinese manufacturing, consumer markets and supply chains. US investment exposure to China runs into hundreds of billions of dollars through direct investment, equities and corporate operations.

That imbalance haunts Taiwan. Taipei understands that while America may admire Taiwanese democracy, Washington's economic dependence on China imposes limits on how far any US president is willing to go. Trump's remarks appeared to confirm precisely that fear.

The military dimension is equally stark. Since 1979, the United States has sold Taiwan more than \$70 billion worth of arms, including F-16 fighter jets, Patriot missile systems, Abrams tanks, Harpoon anti-ship missiles, drones and sophisticated radar systems. Under Trump's first presidency and again since his return to office, arms approvals accelerated sharply as Washington sought to transform Taiwan into what strategists call a "porcupine" — an island so heavily armed that invading it would become prohibitively costly.

Yet weapons alone cannot erase Taiwan's growing anxiety. Ukraine changed everything. Before Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, many Taiwanese believed economic interdependence would deter China from war. That confidence has collapsed. Ukrainians also assumed that massive trade with Europe would restrain Vladimir Putin. Instead, Moscow attacked anyway.

Taiwan now studies Ukraine obsessively. Every drone strike, every trench battle, every delayed Western weapons shipment is analysed in Taipei as a possible preview of its own future. The lesson many Taiwanese draw is chilling: democracies may support you heroically after invasion begins, but they may hesitate before it starts.

Chinese military exercises around Taiwan have become larger, more frequent and more aggressive. Chinese fighter jets regularly cross the median line in the Taiwan Strait. Naval encirclement drills increasingly resemble rehearsals for blockade or invasion operations.

American intelligence officials have repeatedly warned that Beijing may seek the capability to invade Taiwan before the end of this decade. Some military analysts believe the most dangerous period could arrive within the next two years, especially if Chinese leaders conclude that American political divisions or global overstretch have weakened Washington's resolve.

That fear intensified after Trump's Beijing summit. Inside Trump's orbit, advisers are deeply divided on Taiwan. Traditional Republican hawks argue that abandoning Taiwan would destroy American credibility across Asia, embolden China and terrify allies such as Japan, South Korea and the Philippines.

But another faction — increasingly influen-

tial in Trump's nationalist movement — sees Taiwan through a harsher lens. Why, they ask, should America risk war with a nuclear superpower over an island 9,500 miles away? Why should American soldiers die for territory Washington itself does not formally recognise?

Trump's own instincts often appear closer to that second camp. His rhetoric consistently frames alliances in transactional terms. He views geopolitics less through ideological commitments than through cost-benefit calculations. That is exactly what alarms Taiwan.

For decades, Taiwanese leaders relied on a tacit assumption: whatever American politicians said publicly, the United States would ultimately intervene militarily to stop a Chinese invasion. Today that certainty is eroding. Yet paradoxically, Trump's comments may strengthen Taiwanese nationalism rather than weaken it.

Taiwan's younger generation increasingly identifies solely as Taiwanese rather than Chinese. Democratic freedoms, open elections and a vibrant civil society have created a political identity radically different from authoritarian mainland China. Beijing's crackdown in Hong Kong only deepened Taiwanese distrust of Chinese promises about "one country, two systems".

So while Trump's remarks rattled Taiwan's leadership, they have not changed the island's resolve. Taiwan's response this week was calm but defiant. It declared itself sovereign again — carefully avoiding a formal declaration of independence that could trigger war, yet refusing to retreat psychologically. This balancing act defines Taiwan's existence.

It behaves like an independent nation. It has its own military, passport, elections, currency and government. Yet most of the world avoids recognising it officially because countries fear China's economic and diplomatic retaliation.

Even powerful democracies tread cautiously. Few are willing to jeopardise trade with Beijing for symbolic recognition of Taiwan. That diplomatic isolation is precisely what China wants. Beijing's long-term strategy is not necessarily immediate invasion. It is gradual suffocation: diplomatic exclusion, military intimidation, economic pressure and psychological exhaustion designed to convince Taiwan resistance is futile. But history suggests Taiwan may not bend so easily.

The island has evolved from authoritarian rule into one of Asia's most robust democracies. Its people have watched Hong Kong lose freedoms once guaranteed by Beijing. They have watched Ukraine fight a larger aggressor. And now they are watching America signal uncertainty. The danger is that all three actors — China, Taiwan and the United States — may increasingly misread one another. China believes history is on its side. Taiwan believes democracy and identity make surrender impossible. America believes ambiguity preserves peace. But ambiguity becomes harder to sustain when military drills intensify, nationalist politics harden and presidents speak too candidly.

Trump may have intended to calm tensions with Beijing. Instead, he may have exposed the deepest truth of the Taiwan crisis: everyone wants to avoid war, yet all sides are preparing for the possibility that it may already be coming. (IPA Service)

## Russia unleashes another aerial barrage on Ukraine as war's long-range strikes escalate



**KYIV, May 18:** Russia targeted eight regions of Ukraine in its latest nighttime drone and missile barrage, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Monday, with local authorities reporting that the strikes wounded more than two dozen civilians, including three children.

Russian forces fired 524 attack drones and 22 ballistic and cruise missiles, Zelenskyy said. The city of Dnipro and the surrounding central region of Ukraine bore the brunt of the attack, officials said.

The barrage continued a recent spiral of long-range strikes that have grown in scale following a May 9-11 ceasefire that US President Donald Trump said he asked Zelenskyy and Russian President Vladimir Putin to observe, but which had little impact. There is no sign that a peace deal is taking shape despite US diplomatic efforts to end Russia's invasion.

Russia hammered Ukraine over several days last week, flattening a Kyiv apartment building where 24 people died.

One of Ukraine's largest drone strikes on Russia killed at least four people, including three near Moscow, and wounded a dozen others, authorities said Sunday.

### Ukraine develops its own glide bombs

In more than four years of war, Ukraine has built up its own long-range capabilities. It has been hitting oil facilities that represent a vital part of the Russian economy, as well as other targets deep inside Russia, making the Russian public take notice. That has increased the pressure on Putin, whose army is struggling to make progress on the battlefield and who claimed earlier this month, without providing evidence, that the war is approaching its end.

On Sunday, the Russian Defence Ministry said that more than 1,000 Ukrainian drones had been shot down or jammed in the previous 24 hours, with around 80 on their way to Moscow.

In another significant enhancement of Ukraine's long-range arsenal, Defence Minister Mykhailo Fedorov said Monday that the country has developed its first glide bomb — a powerful weapon that has regu-

larly been deployed to devastating effect by Russia. The Ukrainian version carries a 250-kilogram (550-pound) warhead and is designed to strike fortifications, command posts and other targets dozens of kilometres (miles) behind the front line, he said. Ukrainian pilots are currently training with the weapon under combat conditions.

### Zelenskyy sees a big change underway

Zelenskyy claims a significant shift is taking place. "Our long-range capabilities are significantly changing the situation — and, more broadly, the world's perception of Russia's war," Zelenskyy said on X late Sunday. "Many partners are now signalling that they see what is happening and how everything has changed — both in attitudes toward this war and in the reachability of Russian targets on Russian territory."

At the same time, Russia's aerial onslaughts are stretching Ukraine's air defences.

The Defence Ministry in Moscow said Monday it had dealt Ukraine a massive blow overnight with precision ground- and sea-based missiles and drones, striking weapons factories, oil and energy facilities, as well as transport and port infrastructure used by the Ukrainian armed forces. It said the goal of the strike had been achieved and all the designated targets had been hit.

### Ukraine says Russia hits Chinese ship before Putin visits Beijing

Putin is due to meet with Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Beijing this week. Cooperation between the two countries has deepened in recent years as many Western countries have sought to isolate the Russian leader, with China growing to become Russia's main trading partner.

In the meantime, Ukraine's navy claimed that a Russian drone struck a Chinese-owned cargo ship in the Black Sea near Odessa on Monday.

The drone hit the dry cargo vessel KSL Deyang, which was sailing under a Marshall Islands flag, the Ukrainian Navy said in a Telegram post. The ship's owner is based in China, and the crew consists of Chinese nationals, the navy said. There was no immediate word on casualties or the extent of damage to the vessel.

### In other developments, Monday:

The bail for Andriy Yermak, Zelenskyy's former chief of staff, has been paid in full, Ukraine's High Anti-Corruption Court said Monday, according to Ukrainian media. The court last week set bail for Yermak at 140 million hryvnias (roughly USD 3.2 million).

Yermak was named by two Ukrainian anti-corruption watchdogs as a suspect in a major graft probe. The move was a step short of formally charging Yermak, who resigned in November.

Investigators say Zelenskyy is not under suspicion in the case. (AP)

## Hantavirus-stricken cruise ship docks in Netherlands

**ROTTERDAM, May 18:** The cruise ship hit by a deadly hantavirus outbreak has docked at the Dutch port of Rotterdam for disinfection, wrapping up a troubled journey that put international health authorities on alert.

The MV Hondius was carrying 25 crew members and two medical personnel as it reached Rotterdam on Monday morning, after all the passengers disembarked elsewhere.

An Associated Press journalist saw occupants wearing masks on the deck as the boat was escorted through the port by a tug boat and a Dutch police boat. Authorities say that the crew will enter immediate quarantine.

During the outbreak, three passengers who had been aboard the ship died, including a Dutch couple who health officials believe were the first exposed to the virus while visiting South America.

The MV Hondius has spent the past six days sailing from the Canary Islands, where the remaining passengers were escorted off the vessel by personnel in full-body protective gear and boarded flights to more than 20 countries to enter quaran-



tine. The outbreak on the ship has reached at least 11 cases, nine of which have been confirmed.

The Public Health Agency of Canada said one of the four Canadians in isolation after leaving the ship had tested positive Sunday and it would share information on the case with the World Health Organisation.

The vessel made the journey from Tenerife up the coast of Africa and Europe with 25 crew members and two medical personnel. According to

the ship operator Oceanwide Expeditions, no one on board is experiencing any symptoms.

Crew members who are unable to return home will be quarantined in the Netherlands, the Dutch health ministry said last week. Some two dozen passengers and crew are already in quarantine in the Netherlands after arriving in the country on a series of flights over the previous two weeks.

Eighteen Americans are currently under observation at specialised

healthcare facilities in the United States designed to treat people with dangerous infectious diseases.

After everyone on board has disembarked, the ship will be decontaminated based on Dutch public health guidelines.

"Personal protective measures are being taken to ensure that the cleaners do not need to quarantine after the cleaning," the health ministry said in a letter to the Dutch parliament last week.

Public health officials will inspect the vessel before it is allowed to sail again. The hantavirus outbreak aboard the MV Hondius is the first known case on a cruise ship.

The Dutch company that owns the cruise ship said it doesn't foresee any changes to its operations. It has an Arctic cruise setting sail from Ke-flavik, Iceland, on May 29.

France's Pasteur Institute said on Saturday it has fully sequenced the Andes virus detected in a French passenger from the MV Hondius cruise ship and found that it matched viruses already known in South America, with no evidence so far of new characteristics that would make it more transmissible or more dangerous. (AP)

## Pak forces kill 35 Balochistan-based terrorists, arrest 3 commanders

**ISLAMABAD, May 18:** Pakistani security forces have killed 35 members of Balochistan-based terrorist groups and arrested at least three senior commanders in intelligence-based operations in recent days, according to the provincial government.

The security forces launched an operation on May 13 in the Mangla Zarghoon Gar area, a hilly area on the outskirts of the provincial capital Quetta, which continued for four days, Balochistan government spokesman Shahid Rind was quoted as saying by Dawn newspaper.

"Security forces destroyed many camps and hideouts in the successful operation and arrested three commanders during the operation," Rind said, adding that 35 members of the terrorist

groups were killed in the operation. The announcement came days after Quetta and other parts of the province were rocked by violence.

Earlier this month, multiple sites across the provincial capital came under rocket attacks, which were said to have been carried out from locations in the surrounding mountainous areas. At a recent press conference, DIG Imran Shoukat said that the city was facing multiple security threats and that strict security measures were being enforced to ensure the safety of citizens.

Last week, traffic on the Quetta-Taftan road was suspended after a bridge was blown up in the Sheikh Wasil area of Mastung, and unidentified men set fire to trucks carrying goods from Iran. Earlier in the day, the gov-

ernment imposed Section 144 across the province, banning the display and use of weapons, pillion riding, tinted vehicle windows, unregistered motorcycles, and gatherings of five or more people.

According to a notification issued by the Home Department on Sunday, covering faces in public through masks, mufflers, or any other means that may hinder identification has also been prohibited.

The provincial government enforced the orders under Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrP) 1898, declaring them effective immediately for a period of 30 days. The notification stated that restrictions were imposed to maintain law and order and prevent any untoward incidents. (PTI)

## China Evergrande liquidators seek USD 8.4B



**HONG KONG, May 18:** Liquidators of the failed Chinese property developer China Evergrande are seeking 57 billion yuan (USD 8.4 billion) from accounting firm PwC over its auditing work, a Hong Kong court was told on Monday.

The hefty amount was claimed against PwC International, PwC Hong Kong and PwC's mainland Chinese entity, the court heard. A court decision has not yet been made on the claims.

China Evergrande, once one of China's largest real estate developers, first defaulted in 2021, and with more than USD 300 billion in liabilities, became the world's most indebted developer. Its downfall triggered a liquidity crunch in China's property sector, which faced a slump in sales and prices and still has not fully recovered.

After a Hong Kong judge ordered China Evergrande's liquidation in early 2024, its court-appointed liquidators launched legal proceedings against PwC over alleged "negli-

gence" in its work for Evergrande as they attempted to recover what they could for creditors.

Last month, Hong Kong regulators said PwC was paying HKD 1.3 billion (USD 166 million) in fines and compensation over its role in auditing Evergrande's financial statements before its collapse, as they said there were breaches of professional duties by PwC.

PwC said last month that they acknowledged the work on the Evergrande audits "fell well below our high expectations and the expectations of our stakeholders."

That came after mainland Chinese authorities in September 2024 separately fined PwC 441 million yuan (USD 62 million) over its Evergrande audits, and said the Chinese developer had inflated its revenues by roughly USD 80 billion in its 2019 and 2020 financial results. Evergrande founder Hui Ka Yan, once one of Asia's richest people, pleaded guilty to charges in mainland China, including fraud and bribery. (AP)

## After Trump, Putin to visit Beijing for talks with Xi

**BEIJING, May 18:** Russian President Vladimir Putin will visit China on Tuesday — a trip that comes shortly after his US counterpart Donald Trump's visit to Beijing for talks with Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

Xi and Putin will exchange views on bilateral ties, cooperation in various fields, as well as international and regional issues of mutual interest, during Putin's two-day visit, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said on Monday.

This will be Putin's 25th visit to China, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun told a media briefing in Beijing, emphasising on close strategic ties between the two countries as well as strong friendship and rapport between the leaders.

"The two sides will take this visit as an opportunity to continue to promote the development of China-Russia relations to a higher level, which will inject greater stability and positive energy into the world," Guo said.

Since Xi took over power in 2012, the two leaders met dozens of times, frequently referring to

each other as "dear friend" and emphasising mutual trust.

Their ties have strengthened through cooperation in trade, energy, security and efforts to counter western influence.

Many observers view the Xi-Putin relationship as one of the most significant political partnerships in contemporary global affairs.

Putin's visit to Beijing comes days after Trump's three-day visit here from May 14 to 16, during which he held closed-door talks with Xi on a host of global and bilateral issues. The key focus of Trump's visit to China was the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz caused by the ongoing conflict in West Asia, which has caused a severe energy crisis all over the world.

The conflict started on February 28 when the US and Israel launched joint attacks on Iran, triggering retaliatory strikes.

Iran is a close strategic ally of both Russia and China. Both countries are major arms suppliers to Iran. Also, China imports 90 per cent of Iranian

oil, disregarding US sanctions.

A White House fact-sheet released on Sunday about Trump's visit to Beijing said both the US and China have agreed that Iran cannot possess nuclear weapons and they have called to reopen the Strait of Hormuz. They also agreed that no country or organisation can be allowed to charge tolls, the readout said, in apparent reference to Iran's plans to charge ships passing through the Strait.

When asked to comment on the White House fact sheet, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said that during President Trump's visit, the two heads of state agreed on a new vision of building "a constructive China-US relationship of strategic stability" as the "new positioning" of bilateral relations.

They also mapped out plans for high-level engagements and dialogue cooperation across diplomacy, economy, trade and other fields in the next phase, and had in-depth exchanges of views on international and regional issues of mutual concern. (PTI)

## Iranian Nobel laureate Narges Mohammadi released from hospital

**DUBAI, May 18:** Iranian Nobel Peace Prize laureate Narges Mohammadi has been released from a hospital in Tehran after more than two weeks, her supporters said Monday.

They called for Mohammadi, 54, to remain at home to receive follow-up care and daily physiotherapy.

Mohammadi was urgently transferred from prison to a hospital in northwestern Iran on May 1 after she fell unconscious.

She was released on bail nearly 10 days later and transferred to the hospital in Tehran, where specialists examined her.

She was awarded the Nobel in 2023 while in prison and has been jailed repeatedly throughout her career. Her latest imprisonment began in December when she was arrested in the northeastern Iranian city of Mashhad. Her family has said that her health had been deteriorating in prison, in part because she was heavily beaten during her arrest. (AP)

## Pak condemns drone attack at UAE

**ISLAMABAD, May 18:** Pakistan on Monday strongly condemned the drone attack on the Barakah Nuclear Energy Plant in the United Arab Emirates. A drone strike on Sunday caused a fire outside the inner perimeter region of the Barakah Nuclear Energy Plant in Abu Dhabi. So far, no one has claimed responsibility for the attack. "Pakistan stands in full solidarity with the brotherly people and Government of the UAE," the Foreign Office said in a statement.

It said that any deliberate targeting of nuclear facilities constitutes a grave violation of international law, including international humanitarian law, the United Nations Charter, and the fundamental principles of nuclear safety and security enshrined in the

Statute and resolutions of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

"Nuclear installations must never be targeted under any circumstances. Such reckless actions carry potentially catastrophic and irreversible consequences for human life, the environment, and regional as well as global peace and security," it said.

It added that the inviolability of civilian nuclear infrastructure is a well-established international norm and must be upheld without exception. Pakistan called upon all parties to exercise maximum restraint, fulfil their obligations under international law and humanitarian laws, and avoid any actions that could further escalate tensions with consequences extending far beyond the region. (PTI)

## Congo health minister announces three Ebola treatment centres

**DAKAR, May 18:** The Congolese health minister announced the opening of three treatment centres in the Ituri region in eastern Congo on Sunday evening as he visited the region amid the ongoing Ebola outbreak.

"We know that the hospitals are already under stress because of the patients," said Samuel Roger Kamba, the health minister, while visiting Bunia, the capital and largest city in Ituri. "But we are preparing to have treatment centres at all three sites in order to be able to expand our capabilities."

The World Health Organisation declared the Ebola disease outbreak a public health emergency of international concern on Sunday, after more than 300 suspected cases and 88 deaths in Congo and two in neighbouring Uganda.

Although the outbreak is centred in Ituri, cases have been reported in the capital, Kinshasa, and in Goma, the largest city in eastern Congo.

In a separate statement on X on Sunday, the WHO Regional Office for Africa said that a team of 35 experts from the WHO and the Con-



golese Ministry of Health had arrived in Bunia, the capital of Ituri province, along with 7 tons of emergency medical supplies and equipment.

Ebola is highly contagious and can be contracted via bodily fluids such as vomit, blood, or semen. The disease it causes is rare, but severe and often fatal.

WHO's emergency declaration is meant to spur donor agencies and countries into action. By WHO's standards, it shows the event is serious, there is a risk of international spread and it requires a coordinated international response.

Jean Kaseya, Director-General of the Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, told Sky News

on Sunday: "Currently I'm on panic mode because people are dying, I don't have medicines, I don't have vaccine to support countries. Yesterday I called for a meeting of all partners, we have some candidate vaccine, some candidate medicine, we are pursuing this route. We hope that we can have something in the next coming weeks."

Health authorities say the current outbreak, first confirmed on Friday, is caused by the Bundibugyo virus, a rare variant of the Ebola disease that has no approved therapeutics or vaccines.

Although more than 20 Ebola outbreaks have taken place in Congo and Uganda, this is only the third time that the Bundibugyo virus has been detected.

The Bundibugyo virus was first detected in Uganda's Bundibugyo district during a 2007-2008 outbreak that infected 149 people and killed 37.

The second time was in 2012, in an outbreak in Isiro, Congo, where 57 cases and 29 deaths were reported. (AP)

## Italian minister says Modena attack raises integration concerns amid migration debate

**ROME, May 18:** Italy's interior minister said Monday that a car-ramping and stabbing attack in the northern city of Modena by an Italian citizen of Moroccan descent highlights the challenges around integration and social distress.

Eight people were wounded, four critically, when the 31-year-old man drove into pedestrians Saturday before crashing into a shop window.

Despite ruling out terrorism, Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi said it cannot be dismissed as an isolated incident. He said investigators must still fully examine the factors behind the attack, suggesting social marginalisation and perceived discrimination might have played a role.

His comments came as some Italian politicians seized on the attack to voice xenophobic rhetoric, and also renewed focus on so-called second-generation Italians — people born or raised in Italy to foreign parents — who are often at the centre of debates over identity, citizenship and integration.

"At this stage, there are no elements that correspond to the classic profile of a terrorist who plans violent actions," Piantedosi said in an interview with daily Il Giornale, noting the man's mental health concerns and social distress. "But all this cannot lead us to dismiss the attack as the act of an isolated madman."

Italian authorities said the suspect, identified as Salim El Koudri, attempted to flee and slightly wounded a bystander with a knife before being overpowered by passersby and detained by police. Prosecutors arrested him on charges including massacre and aggravated injury. A court hearing on whether to validate his deten-

tion was postponed to Tuesday morning.

Political debate on migration heats up

The suspect, born in Italy and university-educated, had been diagnosed with a personality disorder and had shown frustration over his work and social condition, local authorities said. They said the man underwent treatment in 2022 for what officials described as a schizoid disorder before dropping out of care.

Still, the case has fueled political debate in Italy, where controlling and limiting migration is a key priority in Premier Giorgia Meloni's right-wing agenda.

Deputy Premier Matteo Salvini, leader of the anti-migrant League, referred to the suspect as a "second-generation criminal" in a social post, renewing calls for stricter migration measures.

Opposition politicians criticised the government for seeking to use this case to toughen immigration rules.

"Even before the responsibilities and circumstances surrounding the incident had emerged, the deputy premier (Salvini) transformed a dramatic episode into an anti-immigrant rally," said Carlo Calenda, leader of the opposition party Azione.

Piantedosi, however, sought to draw a distinction between the Modena attack and the government's migration policies, stressing the suspect's Italian citizenship, while noting that it doesn't guarantee successful integration.

He highlighted an email El Koudri sent to his university containing insulting language against Christians before later apologising, suggesting possible resentment linked to perceived discrimination. (AP)

# Security forces intensify operations to rescue hostages in Manipur



**IMPHAL, May 18:** Security forces launched operations in Manipur's Kangpokpi district to rescue those who are still being held hostage by armed groups, police said on Monday.

Area domination exercises and search operations are also being carried out in different parts of the hill district to rescue "all missing

persons and arrest those responsible for holding hostages", a senior officer said.

Thirty-one of around 38 people belonging to the Kuki and Naga communities, who were held hostage by armed groups in Kangpokpi and Senapati districts, were released on May 14 and 15.

These people were taken to

undisclosed locations after suspected militants shot dead three church leaders and injured four others in Kangpokpi on May 13, while a civilian was gunned down and his wife was wounded in Noney district.

"In continuation of the operations to rescue the missing persons, combing and search operations

were carried out by security forces in the hill ranges to the north west of Leilon Vaiphei and Kharam Vaiphei villages in Kangpokpi district," the police statement said.

Twelve Naga women from Kon-sakhul village in Kangpokpi and four men and ten women of the Kuki community in Senapati district were among those who were handed over to the security forces.

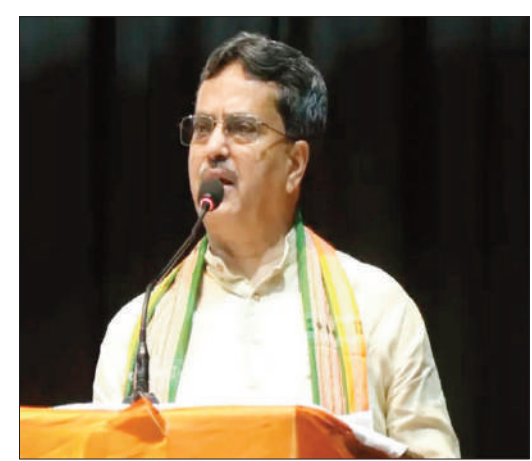
Earlier, the police had said as a result of "concerted efforts" of the administration, security forces, political leaders and civil society organisations, the "majority of the detained civilians, belonging to different communities, have been released safely".

Meanwhile, the United Naga Council, the apex body of the Naga tribes in the state, has been staging inter-district blockades on the national highway 2 and 37 from Sunday night, demanding the release of six Naga men who are suspected to be in the captivity of militants.

Kuki Inpi Manipur, the apex body of the Kuki tribes in the state, also claimed that 14 members of the community were still missing and being held hostage by various groups in Senapati district. (PTI)

# Rural women-led SHGs driving Tripura's growth story: CM Saha

**AGARTALA, May 18:** Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha on Monday said women-led Self Help Groups (SHGs) were significantly contributing to the state's Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP), with the northeastern state producing more than one lakh 'lakhpati didis'.



As many as 4.95 lakh rural women are associated with 55,569 SHGs and are striving for economic independence, he said.

Addressing a programme organised by the Tripura Rural Livelihood Mission (TRLM) at Rabindra Bhawan here, the chief minister said that Samridhhi 1.0 and 2.0 had been successfully implemented to empower rural women.

Saha said the government had set a target of disbursing ₹ 100 crore in loans under Samridhhi 1.0, but the amount eventually rose to ₹ 188 crore.

Similarly, a target of ₹ 150 crore was fixed for loan disbursement to SHGs under Samridhhi 2.0, which later increased to ₹ 260 crore, he said.

Asserting that SHGs were playing an important role in boosting sustainable income generation in rural areas, Saha said the government had so far disbursed loans worth ₹ 2,398 crore to such groups.

"Initially, bankers were sceptical about clearing loan proposals, but now the doubt has been cleared with the overall NPA standing at 1.84 per cent, which is quite low in the corporate sector. Our didis have gained the faith of banks," he said.

Saha also appreciated the TRLM for bringing diversity to the activities of the SHGs from the farm to the non-farm sector to sustain the movement for em-

powering rural women.

"The TRLM is not only helping the SHGs in the farm sector but also extends support to non-farm sector livelihood avenues. The state has already produced 1,08,281 'lakhpati didis', which is significantly contributing to the state's overall GSDP," he said.

Laying emphasis on skill development, the CM said the TRLM has already signed a pact with IIM Kolkata Incubation Park for the business development of the SHGs.

Rural Development department secretary Abhishek Singh and chief executive officer of TRLM, TK Chakma, also highlighted the steps taken for the empowerment of rural women. (PTI)

## Sikkim CM walks 2 km to attend govt programme to promote fuel conservation



**GANGTOK, May 18:** In line with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call to spend wisely, Sikkim Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang on Monday walked over 2 km from his official residence to attend an official programme.

After attending the event, the chief minister returned to his residence by taxi.

Tamang had also walked from his residence, Mintokgang, to Manan Kendra near Development Area here to attend an official programme on May 15.

At the programme, the chief minister announced that private vehicles would be exempted from the odd-even rule on Saturdays and Sundays, though the restriction would continue for government vehicles.

In a statement, chief minister's press secretary Yougan Tamang said the state government had formally initiated various fuel-saving measures from Monday following the prime minister's appeal for disciplined and responsible governance practices.

"In a powerful demonstration of resolve towards the national call for austerity and responsible governance, the chief minister of Sikkim set a personal example by walking to attend an official function," he said.

The press secretary said the gesture was not merely symbolic, but reflected the government's commitment to implementing measures in the wake of the PM's appeal to spend wisely. (PTI)

## Nagaland chief secy assesses recurring flood situation in Dimapur



**HT Correspondent**  
**DIMAPUR, May 18:** Nagaland chief secretary Sentiyanger Imchen on Monday visited several flood-affected and flood-prone areas in Dimapur to review and assess the recurring flood situation in Dimapur and east Dimapur ahead of the monsoon season.

Imchen, accompanied by officials from the district administration and various line departments, undertook an inspection in Nagarjan Police Point, Villhume/S.M. Colony, East Block Burma Camp (Narkul Turning), DMC dumping area, Sunrise colony and New Field Check Gate to assess the prevailing flood situation and recurring drainage issues in the affected areas.

During the inspection, officials briefed him on the major causes of flooding, including clogged drainage systems, encroachment along drainage channels and inadequate drainage infrastructure in several localities.

Following the site inspection, Imchen had a brief meeting with the officials, where he stressed the urgent need for improving solid waste management, stronger inter-departmental coordination and behav-

ioral change among citizens.

Addressing officials and stakeholders, he highlighted the growing problem of clogged drains caused by plastic waste and improper disposal practices.

He said strainers should be installed across upstream nalas to prevent the accumulation of plastic and other debris in drainage channels.

Similar preventive measures, he said, should also be integrated into the construction of check dams and other drainage infrastructure.

Emphasising the importance of coordinated action, Imchen called for close cooperation among the Nagaland State Disaster Management Authority, district administration, police, public health engineering department and municipal bodies to tackle recurring urban flooding and sanitation challenges.

He directed that segregation of waste at the household level into biodegradable and non-biodegradable categories must be implemented without delay, adding that the government would soon issue the necessary orders in this regard.

Imchen said the municipal bodies would be held directly responsible for solid waste management and urged the representatives from municipal councils, civil society organisations and the Naga Council Dimapur to work collectively in maintaining sanitation, removing encroachments and ensuring effective waste disposal practices.

Expressing dissatisfaction over the current state of municipal services, the chief secretary pointed out that despite having adequate manpower, inefficiencies such as poorly maintained garbage collection vehicles were severely affecting waste management operations.

He directed the authorities to prioritise repair and maintenance of vehicles while ensuring better utilisation of available resources.

## Sikkim govt rolls out odd-even vehicle restriction norm to save fuel

**GANGTOK, May 18:** The Sikkim government on Monday rolled out the implementation of the odd-even vehicle restriction norm across the state to save fuel, and strengthened public transport to minimise inconvenience to commuters, an official said.

The implementation came after Prime Minister Narendra Modi appealed to reduce fuel consumption and spend more wisely in view of the West Asia crisis.

According to a notification issued by the state transport department, the new arrangement would come into effect from May 18.

As part of the initiative, City Runner bus services in Gangtok will operate at an interval of 30 minutes from 7 am to 8 pm on the Ranipool-secretariat-Ranipool route to facilitate commuters affected by the odd-even vehicle restriction, the official said.

All public transport services will remain operational on Saturdays and Sundays to ensure uninterrupted mobility for the public, he said.

In addition, all Sikkim Nationalised Transport (SNT) buses, currently operating on assigned routes across the six districts, will continue their services without interruption.

The notification clarified that taxis will remain operational for both local and inter-district transportation as per routes specified in permits. (PTI)

# Arunachal: Food Commission chairman stresses quality, seamless NFSA delivery



**ITANAGAR, May 18:** Arunachal Pradesh State Food Commission (APSFC) Chairman Tarh Tarak on Monday stressed the need for ensuring quality food distribution, resolving technical issues in the public distribution system (PDS) and strengthening public awareness on welfare entitlements.

Tarak was chairing a joint evaluation meeting on the implementation of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) at Ziro in Lower Subansiri district, an official statement said here.

Emphasising that food security must go beyond mere availability of ration, the APSFC chairman called for the establishment of a dedicated food testing laboratory in the region to ensure safety and quality standards of food grains and nutritional supplies distributed under various government schemes.

The high-level review meeting brought together administrative officials and departmental heads from Lower Subansiri and Keyi Panyor districts to assess implementation of the NFSA and related welfare programmes aimed at ensuring food and nutritional security for eligible beneficiaries.

During the meeting, Tarak expressed satisfaction over the main-

tenance and functioning of the Food Corporation of India (FCI) godown in the district, while simultaneously directing officials to address persistent irregularities associated with electronic point of sale (ePOS) machines used in ration distribution.

He observed that technological systems introduced for transparency and accountability should not become obstacles for beneficiaries and instructed the concerned department to take corrective measures to ensure smooth and hassle-free delivery of food grains under the PDS.

The chairman also directed all departments to maintain proper documentation and strictly adhere to statutory guidelines while implementing welfare schemes.

Stressing the importance of awareness generation, Tarak urged officials to intensify outreach activities so that every eligible household is fully informed about its entitlements and access mechanisms under the NFSA.

Earlier, APSFC member Ngasah Tangjang highlighted the evolution of India's food distribution system from the rationing framework during the British era to the present rights-based structure under the

National Food Security Act.

He observed that the Commission has powers equivalent to a civil court to safeguard the interests of vulnerable sections and urged officials to treat the implementation of food security programmes as a critical public service responsibility.

Officials from the Food and Civil Supplies department briefed the meeting on the status of beneficiaries covered under Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) and Priority Household (PHH) schemes in the two districts.

Representatives from the health and social welfare departments, including Child Development Project Officers (CDPOs) and the District Medical Officer (DMO), also apprised the meeting of challenges faced in implementing welfare programmes such as the Supplementary Nutrition Programme and Janani Suraksha Yojana, particularly in view of funding constraints and logistical difficulties in remote areas.

The meeting concluded with a renewed focus on improving transparency, accountability and efficiency in the delivery of food and nutritional support schemes across both districts. (PTI)

## ₹ 44.06 crore initiative aims to boost coffee production, branding and rural livelihoods

# Scindia, Rio launch Nagaland's coffee value chain development project

**HT Correspondent**  
**DIMAPUR, May 18:** Union minister of development of north eastern region (DoNER) Jyotiraditya Scindia and Nagaland chief minister Neiphiu Rio jointly launched the 'Cluster-based Coffee Value Chain Development in Nagaland' project at Sanchar Bhawan, New Delhi on Monday.



Nagaland deputy CM TR Zeliang, adviser to the land resources department G Ikuto Zhimomi, senior government officials, representatives of the Coffee Board of India, farmers and entrepreneurs were also present during the e-launch of the project.

CM Rio expressed gratitude to the DoNER minister for his generous support for the transformative project concerning the development of coffee in Nagaland.

He said ₹ 44.06 crore is being provided by the DoNER and North Eastern Council to the Nagaland land resources department for the project.

Highlighting the potential of coffee in the state, Rio said coffee is no longer just an alternative crop, it is becoming a vehicle for sustainable prosperity.

From just 21 MT in 2021-22, production has grown to nearly 73 MT in 2024-25, with the further aim to achieve 50,000 hectares by 2047 under Viksit Nagaland, he stated.

Rio said under the project, two pilot clusters, Tuophema in Kohima district and Ghotovi in Niuland district have been chosen, which will further be extended to all the districts of Nagaland.

The pilot project will be equipped with hi-tech nurseries to ensure quality planting material, modern post-harvest infrastructure including nine washing stations and roasteries to add value at the farm

gate and branding and marketing campaign to establish 'Coffees of Nagaland' as a premium, traceable, single-origin brand.

Rio said it will help provide dignified livelihoods, reduce dependence on jhum cultivation, conserve forests, and protect the state's fragile ecology.

The project also aims to integrate experiential coffee tourism, farm stays where visitors can experience the journey from cherry to cup, which will create additional income streams for the youth and entrepreneurs while showcasing the state's rich cultural and tribal heritage.

# NSCN-IM rejects allegations by KSO Delhi & NCR

**DIMAPUR, May 18:** The NSCN-IM has categorically rejected and strongly condemned the allegations, accusations, and "inflammatory narratives" circulated in the press statement issued by the Kuki Students' Organisation (KSO) Delhi & NCR dated May 16, 2026, regarding the circumstances arising out of the activities of alleged narco-terrorist groups and organisations in Manipur.

The NSCN-IM stated that the statement issued by the Kuki student body was reckless, unverified, politically motivated and deliberately designed to pro-

voke communal mistrust and further deepen tensions among communities that have already suffered immensely due to the ongoing unrest.

The organisation further stated that repeated attempts to selectively label communities, organisations and individuals without credible judicial findings or lawful evidence were irresponsible and unacceptable.

The NSCN-IM firmly denied any association with terrorism, unlawful armed activities, or organised criminal operations. It also rejected what it described as "false and malicious claims intended

to demonise entire communities through sweeping accusations" and denied the "deliberate distortion" of facts for political propaganda and public manipulation.

"It is deeply concerning that such statements seek to exploit sensitive incidents, communal emotions and national security concerns for divisive objectives," the NSCN-IM said. It added that public platforms and student organisations must act responsibly and uphold peace, moral values and factual integrity instead of spreading narratives that may incite hostility and social unrest. (NNN)

No.BDB/15<sup>th</sup> FC-125/2020-21/1491 Dated the Mushalpur 18<sup>th</sup> May'2026

**SHORT NOTICE INVITING TENDER**

Sealed tender affixing a non-refundable Court fee stamp of Rs. 8.25 (Rupees eight & twenty five) only with a validity period of 180 Days, which will subsequently to be converted and drawn up in the printed of F-2 form are invited from the registered Contractors of Class-II and Class-I(A,B,& C) category of Assam PWD (Building) and BTC, according to their eligibility for submitting tenders for the following works under 15th FC(Tied Grant) for the year 2025-26 as stated below. The tenders will be received by the undersigned up to 12.00 Noon on 10/06/2026 and will be opened on the same date & place at 2.00 P.M.

Name of Works	Tender Amount (Approx)	Cost of Tender Paper	Time of Completion of Work
Construction of community Toilet at Kataligaon Rabha Supa under 15th FC (Tied Grant) for the year 2025-26.	11,00,000/-	500.00	6(six) Months from the date of issue of F.W.O.

Detail N.I.T. may be seen in all working days during office hours in the office of the undersigned. Tender papers will be issued to the contractors or their authorized agents from 20/05/2026 & 8/06/2026 in the office of the undersigned on payment in the form of Demand Draft/Banker's Cheque from any Nationalized Bank, duly pledged in favour of the Principal Secretary BTC, Kokrajhar payable at S.B.I. Kokrajhar.

Sd/-  
Block Development Officer  
Baska Development Block, Mushalpur

IPR(BTC)/C/2026-27/237

# Satheesan-led Cabinet sworn in, announces key welfare measures

**THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, May 18:** Vadasseri Damodara Menon Satheesan, who steered the Congress-led UDF back to power in Kerala after a decade by unseating the Left Front, took oath as chief minister on Monday at a packed and politically charged ceremony held at the Central Stadium here.

His 20-member Cabinet, featuring a mix of experienced leaders and new entrants, was also sworn in by Governor Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar, with senior Congress leader Ramesh Chennithala—once seen as a contender for the top post—among those inducted.

The ceremony drew a wide spectrum of political leaders, including Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and party leader Rahul Gandhi, with alliance partners such as the IUMI, the UDF's second-largest constituent, securing adequate representation in the new ministry, signalling a careful balancing of coalition interests in the new government.

Soon after the one-and-a-half-hour-long oath-taking ceremony and tea gathering at Lok Bhavan, the new Cabinet, chaired by Satheesan, held its first meeting at the state secretariat and decided to implement two of the five programmes announced by Rahul during the launch of the Assembly election campaign in March.

This includes free travel for women on KSRTC buses from June 15 and the creation of a dedi-



cated department for elderly people, which, according to the CM, is the "first of its kind" in the country.

The other guarantees announced by Rahul during the elections are a monthly stipend of ₹ 1,000 for girl students in colleges, an increase in the welfare pension to ₹ 3,000, health insurance coverage of up to ₹ 25 lakh per household, and interest-free loans of up to ₹ 5 lakh for young entrepreneurs.

Fulfilling a promise made during the prolonged agitation by ASHA workers in front of the Secretariat during the Left rule, the UDF Cabinet also approved an increase of ₹ 3,000 per month in their honorarium, taking the total monthly remuneration to ₹ 12,000.

Although this falls short of the commitment made in the UDF poll manifesto, Satheesan said the promises would be implemented in a phased manner.

Satheesan said that the govern-

(SIT) to reinvestigate a case related to the alleged assault on two Youth Congress workers by gunmen of the then Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan during a protest against the Nava Kerala Yatra in Alappuzha in 2023.

A D Thomas, who won the election from Alappuzha, was among the Youth Congress leaders who suffered injuries.

Satheesan dismissed the suggestion that it was a political vendetta and said the government was only implementing the court's directive.

Earlier, Satheesan took the oath in the name of God, amid loud cheers from thousands of supporters who had poured into the state capital from various parts of Kerala, as he said his full name during the swearing-in.

The entire swearing-in ceremony was held in an energetic and celebratory manner, indicative of the high spirits within the UDF, which came back to power by winning 102 of the 140 seats in the Assembly.

UDF workers and supporters also raised loud cheers as each of the new Cabinet ministers, including senior Congress leaders Ramesh Chennithala, K Muraleedharan, A P Anil Kumar and state party chief Sunny Joseph, was sworn in.

The venue was packed with thousands of UDF workers and supporters, some of whom arrived with their families, including children, for the grand event and were seen dancing to drum beats before the swearing-in commenced. (PTI)

# Bengal cabinet approves formation of 2 panels under ex-HC judges to probe graft: CM



**KOLKATA, May 18:** The West Bengal cabinet on Monday approved the formation of two commissions headed by retired judges of the Calcutta High Court to probe alleged institutional corruption and atrocities against women and girl child during the previous TMC regime, Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari said.

He said both retired judges had given their consent, and the panels would begin functioning from June 1.

The CM said the decisions were linked to commitments made during the election campaign and were taken in public interest.

Adhikari said that the panel to probe institutional corruption will be headed by retired Calcutta High Court judge Justice Biswajit Basu, with an ADG-rank IPS officer, Jayraman, as member secretary.

He said the panel would examine alleged irregularities in central and state welfare schemes, public construction works and service delivery systems.

"It will look into corruption, cut money, bribery, misappropriation

communities," Adhikari said.

He said the commission would operate a dedicated complaint system, including a portal, WhatsApp and email channels, and would also take up pending FIRs and general diary entries.

"The members will conduct field visits to police stations and districts, record statements and hold public hearings at the local level," he said.

Adhikari said the commission would also examine pending recommendations of bodies such as the National Human Rights Commission and other constitutional commissions, and could recommend reopening of cases, fresh FIRs, supplementary chargesheets and stronger prosecution measures where necessary.

"We took these decisions in the cabinet today. During the election period, Union Home Minister Amit Shah had declared a chargesheet against the previous state government. There were two commitments made in the larger public interest of the people of the state," Adhikari said.

He said the government was aware of public expectations but stressed that institutional mechanisms take time to become effective.

"There is public expectation, and although we worked out the framework in a short time, this is a long process. If we do not start now, we will not be able to show results in two to three months. That is why we completed the formation within 10 days and also gave cabinet approval," he said. (PTI)

# TVK did no field work, won polls using social media: DMK chief Stalin

**THANJAVUR (TAMIL NADU), May 18:** DMK President M K Stalin on Monday alleged that the ruling TVK led by Chief Minister C Joseph Vijay did no field work but managed to win the April 23 Assembly polls by influencing people using the social media.

Without mentioning the ruling party, the former Chief Minister said social media was used to influence family members through children and "it escaped our eyes." Addressing a function here, Stalin listed several initiatives of his party including conferences and work related to the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls as well. Without directly naming the ruling TVK, he alleged it won without doing any such field work like the DMK. It did not even appoint counting agents in many places, he said.

The DMK has realised this and it will be very careful from now on.

Schemes have been formulated by the party to scuttle such social media based initiatives, he added.

Referring to the robust party organisation, Stalin said the DMK commenced work for the 2026 Assembly polls soon after the conclusion of the Lok Sabha election in 2024, which its-led alliance swept.

The string of party initiatives Stalin mentioned include constitution of booth committees, appointment of booth level agents, campaign to enroll party members, youth and women's wing zonal conferences and so on.

"Still, why we were not able win polls despite doing so much? How is it that those who did not meet the electorate, did not do any work, have won polls?" he asked. The DMK chief, without naming TVK, mentioned that they did not appoint booth agents.

Pointing to the DMK tradition of families getting involved as a whole to slog for the party, Stalin said no one can forget that the DMK and its workers treated both victory and defeat on an equal footing.

However, rivals are plotting to write "political obituary" for the DMK. The party, founded in 1949, has seen several electoral victories and debacles as well and has always risen like a "phoenix", the ex-CM asserted.

Hence, there was no need to be sad, he said and added that "we are in the seat of governance today," and made a reference to a string of welfare schemes implemented during the 2021-26 DMK regime.

After the DMK lost power, Stalin said he appealed to the new dispensation to continue to implement the welfare schemes launched during his party's tenure. He recalled that he had said during the election campaign that the string of welfare schemes implemented by the DMK, including those intended for the welfare of women and students, cannot be changed in the future by anyone. "So I had said then itself that till such time these welfare schemes are implemented, it means that it is the Dravidian model government that is ruling the state. That is the status today," he said.

Furthermore, the DMK chief said he was not disheartened by the defeat and reiterated that the party has set up a committee to tour all the 234 constituencies in the state to assess the ground situation and find out the reasons for the debacle. Incidentally, Stalin himself lost to the TVK in Kolathur in Chennai. (PTI)

# UDF govt announces welfare measures, free KSRTC travel for women from June 15

**THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, May 18:** The newly sworn-in UDF government in Kerala on Monday announced a series of welfare measures, including free travel for women in KSRTC buses from June 15, enhanced honorarium for ASHA and Anganwadi workers, and the creation of a dedicated department for elderly people.

Announcing the decisions taken at the first Cabinet meeting, Chief Minister V D Satheesan said the government had decided to implement two of the five guarantees made during the election.

It was Rahul Gandhi, while launching the election campaign in March this year, who announced five guarantees—free KSRTC bus travel for women, a monthly stipend of ₹ 1,000 for girl students in colleges, an increase in welfare pension to ₹ 3,000, health insurance coverage up to ₹ 25 lakh per household, and interest-free loans of up to ₹ 5 lakh for young entrepreneurs, which later became part of the poll manifesto.

He had also announced the creation of a separate department for elderly people.

Populist measures were announced after the UDF alleged that the state's finances were in dire straits.

In view of this, Satheesan said that a white

paper would be issued detailing the state's financial condition and the government exchequer.

"The first Cabinet meeting decided to implement two Indira Guarantees offered by the UDF. First of all, free travel for women in KSRTC buses. It will be implemented from June 15 onwards. The details will be informed later," he said.

The Cabinet also decided to constitute a separate department for elderly persons, which the CM said could be the first of its kind in the country.

Satheesan said the way a society treats elderly people determines whether it is truly civilised.

"We think the way a society respects old-age people is the measurement for checking whether that society is civilised or not. Our dream is that a day will come when Kerala can declare to the entire world that we are a civilised society and that we are looking after our old-age people decently," he said.

"Definitely, we have to protect each and every old-age person. We will not allow them to be alone. The government is with them. Kerala is with them. That is the message," he said.

He said that, fulfilling a promise made during the prolonged agitation by ASHA workers in front of the Secretariat, the Cabinet approved an in-

# PARK CIRCUS UNREST

## Suwendu issues 'final' warning, vows zero tolerance on attacks against police



**KOLKATA, May 18:** West Bengal Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari on Monday declared "zero tolerance" towards vandalism and attacks on police personnel, warning of the strictest legal action and asserting that if such incidents recur, "no one will be worse than me as the home minister".

The warning came a day after protests against a bulldozer drive linked to action against "illegal structures" turned violent in Kolkata's Park Circus-Tiljala area, with demonstrators allegedly pelting stones at police personnel and vandalising vehicles, prompting Adhikari, who also holds the home portfolio, to signal what he described as the end of the era of "tied hands and feet" policing.

Addressing reporters after visiting the Park Circus Deputy Commissioner's office and meeting police officers and injured personnel following Sunday's violence in the minority-dominated Park Circus area, he projected a tough law-and-order stance, while drawing a sharp contrast with the "functioning" of earlier administrations.

The violence left six police personnel and two CRPF jawans injured, Adhikari said, adding that 40 people had so far been arrested and that the probe was being directly monitored by the Commissioner of Police.

"I am giving a clear message that there will be zero tolerance towards this kind of unrest, hooliganism and anti-national, anti-social activities. We will not allow such things to continue," he asserted.

Adhikari, who met the injured personnel and read out their names before the media, praised the conduct of police and central forces and said they had acted with restraint despite provocation from the mob.

"I came to see the injured police personnel and CRPF jawans, and understand the extent of their injuries. Yesterday, our entire force maintained law and order, prevented a major tragedy and protected people. I came here to tell them that the government stands firmly with them," he said.

Attempting to reassure the force of political backing, Adhikari, who is also the state's home minister, repeat-

edly stressed that police personnel should function fearlessly under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS).

"I have told them that their home minister and chief minister are with them. The entire department, under the leadership of the police commissioner, stands with them. You all have done a good job," he said.

In remarks carrying political overtones, Adhikari suggested that the police force had earlier functioned under constraints.

"Do not think old rules still apply. If anyone believes the police force will continue to function with tied hands and feet, they are mistaken," he said.

Referring to allegations of stone-pelting during the protests, the chief minister drew a comparison with Kashmir and said such incidents would no longer be tolerated in the state.

"Political and religious organisations can hold programmes after informing the police. But gathering people, raising religious slogans and pelting stones cannot continue. Stone-pelting at police in Srinagar and Kashmir has stopped; I believe it will stop in West Bengal and Kolkata, too," Adhikari asserted.

Calling Sunday's unrest "planned", Adhikari claimed social media posts suggested prior mobilisation and warned those involved against repeating such incidents.

"I am making an appeal—do not repeat these things. Listen carefully, this should be the first and the last such incident. We will not allow these to recur," he said.

"Take this as the last warning. If such incidents are repeated, no one will be worse than me as the home minister," Adhikari said.

He said government action would not stop at arrests and that authorities would monitor cases till conviction.

"If a policeman is touched, this government will apply the law to its fullest extent. Our responsibility does not end with arrests. We will closely monitor the process to ensure conviction," he said.

Seeking to send a message of neutrality, Adhikari directed the police to act without considering political affiliation, religion, community identity or influence.

"Police should not have to think five times before taking action. Do not think who belongs to which party, religion or community. Act according to law," Adhikari said.

Invoking Prime Minister Narendra Modi's emphasis on governance through trust rather than fear, Adhikari said police must function with confidence, as he promised institutional support.

The CM also announced modernisation and logistical assistance for the force within six months, and said he would urge the Centre to retain 40 companies of central paramilitary forces in West Bengal for some more time. (PTI)



crease of ₹ 3,000 per month in their honorarium.

Referring to the agitation by ASHA workers, Satheesan said the UDF had honoured the assurance given to them during the protest.

"When the ASHA workers were on the streets in front of the Secretariat and had started a long-term agitation, I myself went there, and many UDF leaders also visited them. We had promised to take action to resolve their problems and that the first Cabinet would take a decision in your favour. So we kept our word," he said.

Satheesan said Anganwadi workers and helpers

# Jairam Ramesh gives privilege notice against Pradhan over 'derogatory' remarks against Parl panel



**NEW DELHI, May 18:** Congress chief whip in the Rajya Sabha Jairam Ramesh on Monday gave a privilege notice against Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan for allegedly lowering the dignity of Parliament with remarks made at a recent press conference. In his notice to Rajya Sabha Chairman C P Radhakrishnan, Ramesh said that during a press conference on May 15 in the aftermath of the NEET-UG exam cancellation, Pradhan made some "derogatory" remarks against a parliamentary committee, which "reveal his contempt for Parliament".

"I have given notice of question of privilege under Rule 187 of Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in the Council of States against the Union Minister of Education for having lowered the dignity of Parliament and Parliamentary Committees.

"He has made these outrageous remarks while presiding over the rot in the Education Ministry that is destroying the future of lakhs of youth across the country," Ramesh said in a post on X. He also shared a copy of the privilege notice sent to Radhakrishnan.

"I, hereby, give notice of question of privilege under Rule 187 of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in the Council of States (Rajya Sabha) against Shri Dharmendra Pradhan, Union Min-

ister of Education, Government of India, for having lowered the dignity of the Parliament and parliamentary committees.

"On 15th May 2026, in his capacity as the Union Minister for Education, Shri Dharmendra Pradhan addressed an official press conference in New Delhi on the issue of the NEET-UG 2026 paper leak," he said in his notice.

Ramesh said Pradhan was subsequently asked by the representatives of the media as to why his ministry had not implemented the recommendations of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education in its report on the National Testing Agency (NTA).

"To this question, the Minister responded as follows -- 'I will not comment on Parliament Standing Committee red flags. I will speak about the High-Level Committee of Experts (HLCE)/Radhakrishnan Committee. The Parliament Standing Committee has members from the opposition. They write things in a certain manner, you also know that. Hence, I won't speak on the standing committee'," Ramesh said.

These remarks by the Union education minister are "outrageous", he said. "They are highly derogatory and seek to malign parliamentarians, parliamentary committees and the Parliament of India. The Parliamentary Committees are an extension of the Parliament of India, and rightly so referred to as mini-Parliament. Hence, the Executive's accountability to the Legislature and its parliamentary committees is a fundamental tenet of India's democratic polity.

"The Minister's impugned comments clearly indicate and reveal his contempt for the Parliament, parliamentary committees, members of the parliamentary committee that are drawn from all political parties and India's constitutional democracy itself," the former Union minister said. (PTI)

## CM Suwendu Adhikari holds first 'janata darbar', listens to public grievances



**KOLKATA, May 18:** West Bengal Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari on Monday held his first 'janata darbar', listening to public grievances and demands at the BJP's state office in Salt Lake.

The outreach initiative is designed to signal a governance model centred on direct citizen access -- a format often associated with BJP-ruled states and one that the party sought to project as part of its "double-engine" narrative in Bengal.

The programme was announced unexpectedly around 9 am by the BJP, with Adhikari reaching the party office within 45 minutes. The 'janata darbar' continued for around an hour.

Several people, including students and locals, attended the interaction and spoke to the chief minister individually behind closed doors, submitting complaints ranging from local civic issues to allegations of syndicate-related pressure.

Sources in the state secretariat, Nabanna, had indicated earlier that Adhikari planned to hold 'janata darbar' sessions for two hours once or twice a week, although no schedule or venue had officially been announced till Monday morning.

Among those present at the citizen interaction were BJP leaders Locket Chatterjee and Shashi Agnihotri. Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath reg-

ularly holds 'janata darbars' where citizens directly place complaints before the administration, while former Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar too had organised such public hearing sessions during his tenure.

Political observers viewed Monday's exercise as an attempt by the new administration to establish a visible connection with people and reinforce the image of a government willing to hear grievances without bureaucratic layers.

Outside the venue of the 'janata darbar' in Salt Lake, some attendees claimed that they felt a sense of relief after being heard by the chief minister personally.

A resident of Bidhannagar alleged that the local syndicate had forced people in the past to purchase construction materials from specific groups.

"We told the chief minister that while constructing houses, people had to buy sand and cement from local TMC leaders. Syndicate raj used to operate. We conveyed these issues to him," the resident said.

A young woman, who attended the session, said that being able to communicate her problems directly to the chief minister had brought reassurance. "The fact that he gave us time and heard us out made us feel relieved," she said.

While the BJP has not clarified where future editions of the programme would be held, party leaders indicated the initiative could become a regular feature of the new government's public outreach strategy.

Meanwhile, the West Bengal BJP highlighted the achievements of the government's first week in office.

In a post on X, the party said several key decisions had been taken between May 9 and May 16 and contrasted this government's functioning with the previous regime.

"What West Bengal under TMC couldn't deliver in 15 years, the double-engine government has started showing in its very first week. This is the new West Bengal and the speed of real governance," it said. (PTI)

## Elections to 17 seats of Maharashtra legislative council on June 18

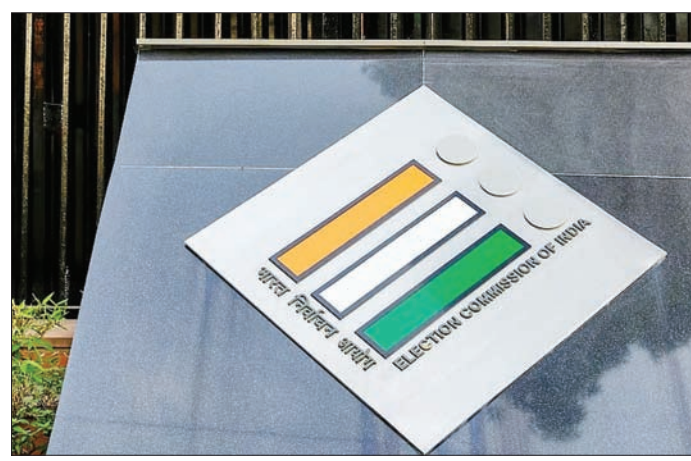
**MUMBAI, May 18:** The Election Commission of India (ECI) on Monday announced that the biennial polls to 17 legislative council seats in Maharashtra from local authorities' constituencies, including one by-election, will be held on June 18.

According to the poll body's notification, the process will officially begin with the filing of nominations on May 25, followed by polling on June 18 and the counting of votes on June 22.

Nominations will be scrutinised on June 2, and the last date for the withdrawal of candidatures is June 4.

The 16 local authorities constituencies going to the polls include Solapur, Ahmednagar, Thane, Jalgaon, Sangli-cum-Satara, Nanded, Yavatmal, Pune, Bhandara-Gondia, Raigad-Ratnagiri-Sindhudurg, Nashik, Wardha-Chandrapur-Gadchiroli, Amravati, Osmanabad-Latur-Beed, Parbhani-Hingoli, and Aurangabad-Jalna.

In a separate notification, the poll body also announced a by-election for the Nagpur local authorities constituency. BJP minister Chandrashekhar Bawankule vacated the seat after his election to the state assembly in 2024.



Polls for several of these seats had been pending since the terms of their sitting members expired in 2022. The process was delayed as the civic body polls were also overdue.

The Maharashtra State Election Commission conducted a three-phase poll to local bodies in December 2025 and January 2026. The ruling Mahayuti is expected to have an edge in the council polls, as they won a majority of seats in the local bodies election.

Among members whose terms ended earlier were Prashant Paricharak (independent) from Solapur and Arunkaka Jagtap from Ahmednagar (undivided

NCP), who retired as MLCs in January 2022, and Ravindra Phatak (undivided Shiv Sena) from Thane, who retired from the council in June 2022.

Several council members retired in December 2022, including Chandubhai Patel (BJP) from Jalgaon, Mohanrao Kadam (undivided NCP) from Sangli-Satara, Amarnath Rajurkar (Congress) from Nanded, Dushyant Chaturvedi (undivided Shiv Sena) from Yavatmal, Anil Bhosale (undivided NCP) from Pune, and Parinay Fuke (BJP) from Bhandara-Gondia.

Aniket Tatkare (undivided NCP) from Raigad-Ratnagiri-

Sindhudurg, Narendra Darade (undivided Shiv Sena) from Nashik, Ramdas Ambatkar (BJP) representing Wardha-Chandrapur-Gadchiroli, Pravin Pote (BJP) from Amravati, Suresh Dhas (BJP) from Osmanabad-Latur-Beed, and Viplove Bajoria (undivided Shiv Sena) from Parbhani-Hingoli retired in June 2024, while the term of Ambadas Danve (Shiv Sena UBT) from Aurangabad-Jalna ended in August 2025.

The ECI notification stated that an election for a Local Authorities' Constituency can only be held if at least 75 per cent of the local bodies within that jurisdiction are fully functional and at least 75 per cent of the electors are in position.

The biennial elections to fill these 16 seats of the 78-member legislative council could not be conducted at the time due to non-fulfilment of the criteria, it said.

"Now, the CEO of Maharashtra has informed that these criteria have been fulfilled in respect of all the said constituencies. Therefore, the commission has decided to conduct the biennial election to the Maharashtra legislative council from the above-mentioned 16 Local Authorities' Constituencies," the notification said. (PTI)

## Delhi CM, ministers commute by metro, buses as part of fuel-saving initiative

**NEW DELHI, May 18:** Under the 'Mera Bharat Mera Yogdan' campaign to save fuel, Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, her cabinet, and senior government officers took a metro to their way to office on Monday.

Gupta boarded the metro from Kashmere Gate station on the Violet Line near her Jan Sewa Sadan residence on Raj Niwas Marg, along with Social Welfare Minister Ravindra Singh Indraj, and reached ITO station near Delhi Secretariat.

"I want to urge all Delhi residents to use public transport, which will not only save fuel but also help fighting pollution and traffic jams. Delhi government is working to strengthen public transport and remove last-mile connectivity issues," she told reporters at ITO metro station.

After reaching ITO, the chief minister opted for the feeder bus service, using the Pink Saheli Card to travel to her office at the Delhi Secretariat.

Delhi PWD minister Parvesh Sahib Singh accompanied the chief minister during the bus journey.

"Mera Bharat, Mera Yogdan" is not merely a government initiative, but a movement driven by public participation, the CMO said in a statement.

The campaign aims convey to every citizen that even a small effort in national interest plays a significant role in strengthening energy security, environmental protection and economic balance, it added.

Cabinet minister Indraj said the Delhi government is committed to advancing the 'Mera Bharat Mera Yogdan' campaign through widespread public participation, and initiatives such as 'Metro Monday' will play an important role in strengthening the vision of 'Viksit Bharat' and a 'Viksit Delhi'.

On the other hand, the PWD minister walked to the nearest metro station from his residence and then took a metro to ITO, before joining the chief minister for the bus journey to Delhi Secretariat.

"I have travelled in metro several times before, it took me less time than car. I request everyone to join this campaign, because greater use of public transport will not only reduce traffic and pollution, but will also make a significant contribution to building a responsible and developed India," the PWD minister said.

Cabinet ministers Ashish Sood, Manjinder Singh Sirsa, Kapil Mishra, Pankaj Singh also took the metro to reach their

destinations.

Education minister Sood travelled from his residence to the INA Metro Station and from there he reached Civil Lines Metro Station by metro.

"The Delhi government has appealed to the people of Delhi to use public transport, and I myself am also following the same. I will also work from home for the next two days," Sood said.

Tourism and culture Minister Kapil Mishra said that recently he had appealed to traders and industrialists of Delhi to promote work from home and the use of electric vehicles and that he has received full cooperation from them.

Transport Minister Pankaj Singh travelled by Delhi Metro to Ram Krishna Ashram Marg station as part of the government's 'Metro Monday' initiative.

"We want to appeal to all citizens of Delhi to use public transport, this is a message that we want to give. Government is continuously increasing its bus and metro fleet, our public has complete faith in Prime Minister Narendra Modi," transport minister said.

Environment Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa also took the metro to reach the Delhi Secretariat. (PTI)

## Coaching centre founder arrested in NEET case

**NEW DELHI, May 18:** The CBI arrested Renukai Career Centre founder Shivraj Raghunath Motegaonkar on Sunday over his alleged involvement in the NEET-UG paper leak, agency officials said on Monday.

Motegaonkar was arrested on Sunday evening after the agency recovered a leaked question paper of the examination held on May 3 from his personal mobile phone during searches at his premises, the officials said.

The officials said Motegaonkar was allegedly an "active member of the organised gang" involved in the leakage and circulation of the NEET-UG paper. As part of a conspiracy with other accused persons, Motegaonkar received the question paper and answers on April 23, nearly 10 days ahead of the high stakes examination was held across the country and abroad, the agency said in its grounds for arrest.

The CBI will send the seized mobile phone for forensic analysis to recover deleted data, if any, they said.



The agency has alleged that Motegaonkar provided copies of the leaked question papers and answer sheets to several people in the form of handwritten notes that were destroyed after the examination was held.

The agency conducted searches at the coaching centre in the Shivnagar locality of Latur on Sunday afternoon. Motegaonkar was questioned for nearly eight hours on Friday at his residence in the same area.

The agency had earlier arrested a chemistry lecturer, PV Kulkarni, and a biology

lecturer, Manisha Mandhare, both known to each other through a woman, Manisha Waghmare, who is also in CBI custody.

The two lecturers had allegedly roped in Waghmare to bring in NEET aspirants for special sessions before the examination.

Students allegedly paid several lakh rupees to attend the sessions where they wrote the questions down in their notebooks, which later "tallied exactly" with the actual NEET-UG paper, the officials said.

The federal agency has registered an FIR and formed teams to probe the alleged paper leak that resulted in the cancellation of the exam.

The exam was conducted across 551 Indian cities and at 14 overseas centres. Nearly 23 lakh candidates had registered for the test, which was administered by the NTA across the country.

According to the NTA, information regarding alleged malpractice was received on the evening of May 7, four days after the exam was held. (PTI)

## Road crash in UP leaves 10 dead

**LAKHIMPUR KHERI (UP), May 18:** Ten people were killed when a van collided head-on with a truck on the Sisaiya-Lakhimpur national highway on Monday, police said.

The van was going to Sisaiya from Lakhimpur when the accident took place between Unchgaon and Bharehta villages.

Circle Officer of Dhaurahra, Shamsheer Bahadur Singh, said all nine passengers travelling in the van and the driver were killed.

District Magistrate of Lakhimpur Kheri Anjani Kumar Singh told reporters that the van collided with a truck coming from the opposite direction, leading to nine casualties on the spot, while one succumbed to injuries at the district hospital.

Circle Officer, Dhaurahra, Shamsheer



Bahadur Singh told PTI, "Efforts are on to establish the identity of other deceased persons."

The seven of the deceased have been identified as Jaideep Singh (25), Pawan (23), Sohan (21), Ram Goyal (42), Sahajram (35), Pappu (18), all residents of Bahraich district and Adnan Khan (15), a resident of Lakhimpur Kheri district, police said.

Condoling the loss of lives in the accident, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister

Yogi Adityanath in a post on X, said, "The loss of life in the unfortunate road accident in Lakhimpur Kheri district is deeply distressing and heart-wrenching. My condolences are with the bereaved families."

"I have directed the local administration to provide prompt and adequate assistance to the injured and the victims. I pray to Lord Shri Ram to grant the departed souls a place at His divine feet and to bestow a speedy recovery upon the injured," Adityanath said on X.

Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Prasad Maurya and Brajesh Pathak too condoled the loss of lives in the accident.

"The loss of lives resulting from the road accident in Lakhimpur Kheri district is deeply tragic and heart-wrenching. My deepest condolences go out to the bereaved families," Maurya said. (PTI)

### NOTICE INVITING EXPRESSION OF INTEREST

Under the provision of Rules 32 (1) & (2) of Assam Mines and Mineral sealed tender are hereby invited for grant of Mining Permit/ Contract for collection of Sand/Stone as per Annexure 'A'. The prescribed form is to be obtained from the undersigned and will be received up to 3:00 PM (IST) on or before 08/06/2026.

#### ANNEXURE-'A'

#### STATEMENT SHOWING THE LIST OF MAHAL OUTSIDE RESERVE FOREST UNDER KARBI ANGLONG EAST DIVISION, DIPHU.

Sl. No.	Name of Mahal	Quantity	Period	Govt. Value	Earnest Money	GPS Coordinate
1.	Jamuna River Sand Mahal Langkangbop	8,000 m <sup>3</sup>	2 Year	11,20,000/-	10% 1,12,000/-	1. 26°00'49.1" N 93°14'09.2" E
						2. 26°00'47.2" N 93°14'10.3" E
						3. 26°00'51.1" N 93°14'00.3" E
						4. 26°00'51.0" N 93°14'02.4" E
2.	Jamuna River Sand Mahal No. 9	8,000 m <sup>3</sup>	2 Year	11,20,000/-	10% 1,12,000/-	1. 26°00'36.1" N 93°15'11.3" E
						2. 26°00'34.7" N 93°15'11.3" E
						3. 26°01'00.6" N 93°14'01.3" E
						4. 26°00'59.7" N 93°13'54.7" E
3.	Jamuna River Sand Mahal No. 5	6,000 m <sup>3</sup>	2 Year	8,40,000/-	10% 84,000/-	1. 25°59'47.00" N 93°22'18.22" E
						2. 25°59'46.88" N 93°22'19.45" E
						3. 25°59'12.31" N 93°21'44.00" E
						4. 25°59'13.47" N 93°21'44.36" E
4.	Jamuna River Sand Mahal Sonapur Bomrui No. 1	8,000 m <sup>3</sup>	2 Year	11,20,000/-	10% 1,12,000/-	1. 26°41'2.680" N 93°6'51.690" E
						2. 25°41'3.850" N 93°6'50.570" E
						3. 26°49'210" N 93°07'2.730" E
						4. 26°48'120" N 93°7'0.880" E
5.	Jamuna River Sand Mahal Sikari Pathar Singimari	5,000 m <sup>3</sup>	2 Year	7,00,000/-	10% 70,000/-	1. 26°01'396" N 93°13'06.9" E
						2. 26°01'41.6" N 93°13'02.8" E
						3. 26°01'42.0" N 93°12'58.7" E
						4. 26°04'20.7" N 93°06'58.4" E
6.	Jamuna River Sand Mahal Samaguri	4,000 m <sup>3</sup>	2 Year	5,60,000/-	10% 56,000/-	1. 26°04'33.6" N 93°06'24.7" E
						2. 26°04'33.4" N 93°06'25.4" E
						3. 26°04'19.6" N 93°06'57.4" E
						4. 26°04'20.7" N 93°06'58.4" E
7.	Doigrung River Sand cum Sand Gravel Mahal	8,000 m <sup>3</sup>	2 Year	11,20,000/-	10% 1,12,000/-	1. 26°21'43.6" N 93°46'13.6" E
						2. 26°21'47.1" N 93°46'15.6" E
						3. 26°21'44.3" N 93°46'11.3" E
						4. 26°21'48.3" N 93°46'13.0" E
8.	Kalioni Richomili Sand cum Sand Gravel	4,000 m <sup>3</sup> Gravel, 3,000 m <sup>3</sup> Sand	2 Years	12,20,000	10% 1,22,000/-	1. 26°27'21.01" N 93°43'36.21" E
						2. 26°27'20.50" N 93°43'36.73" E
						3. 26°27'36.07" N 93°45'13.38" E
						4. 26°27'34.86" N 93°45'12.87" E
9.	Upper Laichan, Nagalanso Sand Mahal	4,000 m <sup>3</sup>	2 Years	5,60,000/-	10% 56,000/-	1. 26°09'089" N 93°41'674" E
						2. 26°09'091" N 93°41'689" E
						3. 26°09'784" N 93°42'150" E
						4. 26°09'777" N 93°42'181" E

RO no. IPRD/KA/2026-27/08

SD/-  
Divisional Forest Officer  
Karbi Anglong East Division, Diphu

## Officials says India closely monitoring Ebola situation

**NEW DELHI, May 18:** The Ebola outbreak in parts of Africa has once again raised global public health concerns, with Indian authorities keeping a close watch on the evolving situation and health experts stressing the importance of surveillance to prevent its possible importation into the country. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has declared the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Uganda a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) after more than 300 suspected cases and nearly 90 deaths were reported. Indian health ministry officials said the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) is closely monitoring developments, while a review meeting was also held to assess India's preparedness, screening mechanisms and response strategy in case of any suspected case being detected in the country.

Ebola is a severe and often fatal illness caused by the Ebola virus, which spreads through direct contact with the blood, body

fluids or tissues of infected people or animals.

The symptoms of Ebola disease can be sudden and include fever, fatigue, malaise, muscle pain, headache and sore throat. These are followed by vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal pain, rash, and symptoms of impaired kidney and liver functions.

While there is currently no Ebola outbreak in India, experts said international travel and global connectivity mean that countries must remain vigilant against infectious disease threats.

India reported its only known Ebola case in November 2014, when a 26-year-old man who had travelled from Liberia tested positive for the virus in Delhi. Health authorities had then isolated the patient and carried out extensive contact tracing, preventing any further spread, according to government sources.

The WHO had earlier declared Ebola outbreaks as a PHEIC in 2014 during the massive West Africa outbreak that killed more than 11,000 people, and in 2019 during the outbreak

in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The latest declaration marks the third time Ebola has triggered the WHO's highest level of global health alert.

The disease has previously caused major outbreaks in several African nations, with fatality rates ranging from 25 to 90 per cent, depending on the strain and healthcare response.

Dr Sanjay Rai, Professor at the Department of Community Medicine, AIIMS Delhi, said India's risk at present remains low. "India has robust airport screening systems and disease surveillance mechanisms compared to earlier years. However, any outbreak anywhere in the world is a reminder that infectious diseases do not respect borders. Travellers coming from affected countries need close monitoring," Rai told PTI.

He said Ebola does not spread through the air like COVID-19, which limits the chances of large-scale community transmission. "The virus mainly spreads through direct contact with infected bodily fluids, contami-

nated surfaces, or unsafe burial practices. Healthcare workers and family caregivers are at a higher risk if proper protective measures are not followed," he explained. Dr Rai noted that India's large population and crowded healthcare settings could pose challenges if an imported case goes undetected.

"That is why awareness among doctors, airport authorities and surveillance teams is extremely important. Even a single imported infection must be managed quickly to avoid secondary transmission," he said.

Chairman of Internal Medicine, Respiratory and Sleep Medicine at Medanta, Dr Randip Guleria, said India's preparedness improved substantially after the COVID-19 pandemic. "The country now has stronger laboratory networks, emergency response systems and infection-control awareness. Still, hospitals must remain alert, especially while handling international travellers with unexplained fever or bleeding symptoms," Dr Guleria told PTI. (PTI)

## Comic artist Ramon K Perez on 'RRR' & 'Singham': They are superhero stories



Award-winning comic book creator Ramon K Perez believes Indian cinema is re-defining the superhero genre with popular films like "RRR" and "Singham", which he praised for their scale and storytelling.

"I've enjoyed a lot of Indian movies, Bollywood movies, like 'RRR' on Netflix. There are a few police movies, (where) he (hero) has sunglasses, big moustache, he keeps flipping cars through the air, such as 'Singham'.

"I love the energy; I like these superhero movies with regular characters. Like, Netflix already is adapting a few of these things over to Western audiences. I think there's energy for that (to be adapted)," Perez told PTI in an interview when asked if any Indian film could be adapted into a comic book for western audiences.

Both "RRR" and "Singham" have been huge commercial hits and have been lauded for their action, drama, and storytelling. The peppy, foot-tapping song, 'Naatu Naatu' from the movie "RRR", won the Best Original Song award at the 95th Academy Awards. The Telugu period action film is directed by SS Rajamouli and features NTR Jr and Ram Charan in the lead. "Singham" is a Hindi language film, helmed by Rohit Shetty and it stars Ajay Devgn in the role of an honest and fearless police officer.

Perez, known for comic books like "Nova: Resurrection", "The Amazing Spider-Man: Learning to Crawl", and "All-New Hawkeye", was talking on the sidelines of Comic Con 2026 in Mumbai last week.

He said there's a need for the superhero genre to evolve in Hollywood to stay relevant. "So, many of these (superhero) characters, like the Marvel and DC characters, date back to the 40s and 50s. These characters have to evolve for a new generation because even the tapestry of people in North America has changed from what it was 50 years ago.

"So, you have a whole different demographic of people who have different cultural backgrounds and different struggles that these superheroes have to reflect."

When asked about the fatigue around superhero movies in Hollywood—a concern raised by top filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese and Ridley Scott—Perez said the issue lies not with the genre but with the overproduction of such films. "I think when companies find a good thing, and they keep pushing it and pushing it, and they find a formula, I find the newer movies have been less interesting. So, I don't

think it's necessarily superhero fatigue, it's the company's putting out too much, too fast, and not putting out enough quality and thought into what they're making.

"So, the audience can react to that by not going. Like, there are so many movies coming out that I see the trailer, or maybe I've watched them, and I'm like, 'oh, this is nowhere near as good as the one they made two or three years ago' because they have a formula, they're repeating."

Perez said there was a need to pause and then create something of value that's intentional rather than making something that just feeds the machine.

The multiple Eisner and Harvey Award-winning comic book writer and artist lauded the resurgence in comic books, citing the success of newer titles like, 'Absolute Batman'.

"The audience between the movies and the books, there is a crossover but it's a very different audience. For example, I've friends who have seen all the Marvel movies

but they've never read the comic books. "Right now, there is a bit of resurgence and excitement about the 'Absolute' series from DC Comics. For instance, 'Absolute Batman' is one of the highest-selling books in decades in comic books," he said.

Speaking of Mumbai Comic Con, Perez said he was struck by the enthusiasm of Indian fans at the event.

"I know my American characters, I know my Manga characters, I want to know what the flavour of India is when it comes to superheroes and stories," Perez said before attending the comic convention and admitted that he isn't familiar with the Indian comic scene.

The Canadian cartoonist-illustrator, who credits 'Star Wars' as a major influence that shaped his creative path, has revealed that he is focusing on developing his original characters.

"I've a little black book full of my own characters. I'm slowly working on and putting out my own stories. I'm returning to more of my own characters after decades of working for Marvel and DC. So, I'm excited to put my own stories out there," he said.

About his first experience in Mumbai, Perez said he was astounded as he explored some of the landmark places and local cuisines like chicken lollipop, kebabs, and keema at the popular Café Leopold in South Mumbai.

"...Seeing the architecture and the density of people here was astounding. Like the traffic, the horns were a little bit overwhelming. But it's been great," he said. (PTI)

## RANVEER SINGH'S 'DHURANDHAR: THE REVENGE' TO STREAM ON JIOHOTSTAR FROM JUNE 4

Ranveer Singh-starrer action thriller "Dhurandhar: The Revenge" will make its streaming debut on JioHotstar on June 4 with a special digital premiere event, the platform announced on Friday.

The Aditya Dhar-directed film, which was released in cinema halls on March 19 and amassed over Rs 1,790 crore at the global office, will be available in its original and unfiltered form for the first time in India, JioHotstar said in a statement.

Ahead of the streaming premiere, viewers will get access to a specially curated 30-minute pre-show at 7 pm featuring candid cast conversations, behind-the-scenes stories and insights into the making of the film.

The movie will then be available for all viewers on JioHotstar from June 5 onwards.

Alok Jain, Head - Hindi & English Entertainment Business (Streaming, TV & Studios) at JioStar, said the aim was to create an experience that goes beyond a conventional movie premiere and transforms into "a large-scale cultural viewing moment."

"Today's audiences are seeking deeper immersion and participation and this premiere has been designed to deliver exactly that. From presenting the film in its original, unfiltered form to curating a premiere experience designed for digital audiences, every aspect of the experience has been thoughtfully crafted to make it more immediate, immersive, and engaging for viewers across the country," he added.

"Dhurandhar: The Revenge" is a follow-up to Dhar's "Dhurandhar", which released in theatres in December 2025 and also performed exceptionally at the box office, earning over Rs 1,300 crore.

Director Aditya Dhar said he was excited to bring the film to audiences through "this unique premiere experience."

"The film has always been rooted in scale, inten-



sity, and emotion, and I'm looking forward to audiences across the country experiencing it on the platform from June 4 onwards," he said.

The "Dhurandhar" duology, which has collectively earned over Rs 3,000 crore worldwide, follows Ranveer Singh as Jaskirat Singh Ranghi, an Indian operative on an undercover mission in Pakistan.

The first film, "Dhurandhar", Ranghi going undercover as Hamza Ali Mazari to infiltrate Karachi's criminal syndicates and political power structures in Pakistan in an effort to dismantle a terror network targeting India.

The film, which later became available for stream-

ing on Netflix, drew inspiration from real-life events including the 1999 IC-814 hijacking, the 2001 Indian Parliament attack, and the 2008 Mumbai attacks.

"Dhurandhar: The Revenge" continued the story of the undercover agent as he deepens his infiltration of Karachi's criminal syndicates and Pakistani politics while avenging the 26/11 attacks and confronting larger threats. In the US and Canada, the film will start streaming on Netflix on Saturday.

The movie, which also features R. Madhavan, Arjun Rampal, Sanjay Dutt, Sara Arjun and Rakesh Bedi, is produced by Jyoti Deshpande of Jio Studios and Lokesh Dhar. of B62 Studios. (PTI)

## Shakira, Burna Boy release official 2026 FIFA World Cup Anthem 'Dai Dai'

As the song demands: "Let's go!" The Colombian superstar Shakira and Afrobeats icon Burna Boy have teamed up for "Dai Dai," the official song for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

It's a mesh of their musical landscapes: Afrobeats and Latin rhythms, an undeniably global, multi-lingual pop track. In one verse, they name a number of the world's most famous soccer players and countries competing in this year's World Cup: "Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Colombia," Shakira cheers. "Mexico, Japan, Korea, Netherlands."

After the first chorus, Shakira and Burna Boy take

turns tackling their own verses, singing back and forth, before joining in a duet.

The song arrived shortly after it was announced that Shakira, Madonna and K-pop group BTS will co-headline the FIFA tournament's first-ever final half-time show on July 19 at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey, just outside New York City. The lineup was curated by Coldplay's Chris Mar-

tin. The show will support the FIFA Global Citizen Education Fund, which is raising USD 100 million to help children access education and soccer.

Shakira first teased "Dai Dai" last week, sharing a minute-long teaser clip of her dancing in the centre of the field of Maracana Stadium in Rio de Janeiro. She included a snippet of the opening verse: "Here in this place / You belong," she sang in English, a male voice harmonising with her now identifiable as Burna Boy. "What broke you once / Made you strong."

She is no stranger to World Cup anthems. Her song "Waka Waka (This Time For Africa)" was the official song of the 2010 World Cup held in South Africa and is widely regarded as one of the best.

It's also not uncommon for sponsors of the FIFA World Cup to release their own singles for the tournament. In March, Coca-Cola shared its own official anthem for the World Cup, a re-imagining of Van Halen's "Jump" that features Colombian singer J Balvin, drummer Travis Barker, pop/R and B singer Amber Mark and guitarist Steve Vai.

It is similarly multi-lingual: Balvin wrote a new verse in Spanish for the anthem, bringing in Brazilian funk and hip-hop to the classic rock staple. "Jump" is not a futbol song," he told The Associated Press about the original track, using the Spanish word for soccer. "So that's why I had to put the Latin love and passion for futbol (in the lyrics)." (AP)



## Soni Razdan reacts to Alia Bhatt's Cannes video, says social media is full of hate

Actor Soni Razdan has slammed social media trolls targeting daughter Alia Bhatt's Cannes Film Festival outing, saying the hate reveals something about society.

Bhatt attended the festival and walked the red carpet as India's global ambassador for L'Oréal Paris for the second consecutive year.

A video post claims that the photographers did not know the actor, 33, and lowered their cameras while she was posing on the red carpet.

The users online were divided, with some defending the actor and others turning to troll her, claiming she isn't recognised at the international level.

"Social media is full of many things — love, information, entertainment — and... a lot of hate. And more than anything else, it reveals something about society. A very interesting sociological discussion could ensue and be discussed and studied for years to come," Razdan wrote in response to a post defending Bhatt's Cannes appearance.

Bhatt had also responded to a comment that read: "What a pity, no one noticed you." The actor responded, saying, "Why pity love? You noticed me."

The film festival started on May 12 and will conclude on May 23.

Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, a Cannes regular for many years and actor Aditi Rao Hydari, are also attending the festival. (PTI)



## Everyone was doubtful: Saif Ali Khan on playing Langda Tyagi in Vishal Bhardwaj's 'Omikara'



Saif Ali Khan vividly remembers the time when he was talking to his mother, veteran star Sharmila Tagore, on phone and she asked him to do a Shakespearean adaptation, notably "Othello". And the very next call he received was from filmmaker Vishal Bhardwaj who offered him the Langda Tyagi role in "Omikara". "I thought, 'What is going on?'" Saif recalled, reflecting on the overwhelming praise he received for his performance in Bhardwaj's Hindi heartland adaptation of "Othello".

At the time, the actor was

shooting for Vidhu Vinod Chopra's 2007 movie "Eklavya" in Jaipur, Rajasthan.

"I was staying at the lovely Rambagh hotel and one day, I was sitting on the lawn in the morning, having breakfast, and my mom was talking to me and she said, 'You're doing well now, you're acting well, I'm very pleased with how things are going. I think you should do Shakespeare, like 'Othello' or something.' So, I was like, 'That would be interesting, thanks mom.' And I hung up.

"Just then, the phone rang and it was Vishal Bhardwaj

saying, 'I want to come and see you, I've 'Othello.' Saif told PTI in an interview.

The actor said he asked the filmmaker if he can play the titular role in the movie.

"He (Bhardwaj) said, 'No, it's not Othello. It's Iago.'... He's very good like this and said, 'I find you very handsome looking and Othello is slightly complex to the way he looks. So, you can't do that. But listen to what I have in mind,'" Saif recounted.

Released in July 2006, "Omikara" is widely regarded as one of Hindi cinema's finest Shakespearean adaptations, transplanting the tragedy of "Othello" to the political badlands of Uttar Pradesh.

The film featured Ajay Devgn in the title role, with Saif playing the scheming Langda Tyagi alongside Kareena Kapoor, Vivek Oberoi and Konkona Sen Sharma.

Saif's performance earned him the Filmfare Award for best supporting actor and is widely counted among the finest of his career.

Asked what made Bhardwaj cast him as the antagonist in the movie, the actor said, "He told me, 'I saw 'Dil Chahta Hai, I think you can do it.' I don't know, he saw something evil in my portrayal of Sameer. So, we did it."

Saif praised the filmmaker for always having faith in him.

"Everyone was doubtful but he was very kind and supportive and helped me with the dialogues. I did a lot of homework. I was on holiday in Maldives, people were like, 'Why don't you rehearse in the heartland?' I was reading this script under an umbrella in the Maldives, learning all these lines and kept practicing. Then I came back."

He remembered nailing the first shot he gave for the movie.

"It was a nice scene with the great Deepak Dobriyal. Then everyone on the set started calling me 'Khan sahab' which was their way of saying that you can do it."

Now 20 years later, Saif said he is still reaping the rewards

of "Omikara". He next stars in the Netflix cop drama "Kartavya".

"The film has done so much for me, and I'll always be thankful. It's expressed a certain range to a bunch of filmmakers, who would otherwise think that I can't do it. They've said, 'okay, if he's done that, then he can do this'."

"I like playing roles like this (in 'Kartavya'), which is not like 'Omikara' but it's a little grounded, rooted, and very different to my personality. But that's the whole point of acting. So, it's nice if you can be free enough to have your own accent and your own body language and not try and convince people that actually you can be different," he said.

"Kartavya", which also features Sanjay Mishra, Saurabh Dvivedi, Zakir Hussain Manish Chaudhari and Rasika Dugal, will premiere on Netflix on Friday. It is directed by Pulkit of "Bhaskar" fame and produced by Gauri Khan under the banner Red Chillies Entertainment. (PTI)

## Elina Svitolina and Marta Kostyuk raise trophies for war-torn Ukraine on the tennis court

**ROME, May 18:** It's more than just poignant and intentional handshake snubs from Ukrainian players on the tennis courts these days.

With Elina Svitolina and Marta Kostyuk leading the way, there have been trophies to raise, too.

Svitolina's Italian Open title over the weekend made it back-to-back WTA 1000 titles for Ukraine after Kostyuk's Madrid Open victory two weeks earlier.

Three days after one of the deadliest attacks on Kyiv in the 4-year-old war with Russia, Svitolina paid tribute Saturday during the trophy presentation to "all the people back in Ukraine who've been supporting me, been watching at nights being in the bomb shelters."

"It's been really heavy for the past couple of weeks for Ukraine. ... I feel all the love. Thank you, Slava Ukraini!" Svitolina said after her victory over Coco Gauff, invoking the watchword of Ukrainians — "Glory to Ukraine."

The death toll from a Russian missile attack on Thursday that flattened a Kyiv apartment building was 24, including three teenagers.

Likewise, in Madrid, Kostyuk finished her victory speech with "glory to God and glory to Ukraine."

**Svitolina No. 3 in the race rankings**

Svitolina's third Italian Open title came eight years after her previous trophy in Rome. It also follows a maternity break in 2022 that made her work her way back from a ranking that year of No.



236.

She's now back in the top 10 (No. 7) at age 31 and heading to the French Open, which starts on Sunday, as a Grand Slam title contender again.

In the season-long race rankings that take into account only this year, Svitolina is No. 3 behind only Elena Rybakina and Aryna Sabalenka.

Svitolina beat three reigning Grand Slam champions in succession at the Foro Italico: Rybakina (this year's Australian Open champion) in the quarter-finals, Iga Swiatek (last year's Wimbledon champion) in the semi-finals, and Gauff (last year's French Open winner) in the final.

"This is one of the toughest draws that I had in a tournament,"

Svitolina said. "I'm very proud of the way that I've been handling myself and handling the nerves and being consistent."

**Kostyuk on an 11-match winning streak**

Kostyuk's victory in Madrid — the biggest title of her career — came immediately after she won another clay-court title in Rouen, France.

She withdrew from the Italian Open due to hip and ankle issues but will go to Roland Garros on an 11-match winning streak

"She always has been a very strong player," Svitolina said. "Now she's more consistent."

Svitolina and No. 15 Kostyuk lead seven Ukrainians in the top 100 of the rankings.

"Taking in consideration the war and everything, what's hap-

pening in our country, I think it's great inspiration for (the) younger generation," Svitolina said. "It shows that it is possible. Especially for girls back in Ukraine, it's a great example."

**Still no handshakes with Russians, Belarusians**

When Kostyuk beat Russian opponent Mirra Andrejeva in the Madrid final, she didn't shake her hand at the net. That's been the protocol for Ukrainian players with opponents from Russia and its ally Belarus since the war started. Players from Russia and Belarus have been made to compete with neutral status and without their national flags.

In a political shift this month, though, the International Olympic Committee said athletes from Belarus should once again compete with their full national identity.

"The war is still ongoing. Still rockets are going to Ukraine," Svitolina said. "Those two countries still considered aggressors. For us it's very sad and very painful to see this even considered."

**Svitolina's husband Monfils to retire**

While Svitolina has been winning more often on the court lately, her husband and French player Gael Monfils could get more attention at his final Roland Garros before he retires at the end of the year.

"It's going to be very, very busy, but in the same way I think very special for us as a family and of course for him personally," Svitolina said. "Just going to enjoy and give it his best shot. The last one." (AP)

## Barcelona wins in Lewandowski's farewell

### Sevilla avoids relegation despite loss to Real Madrid



**MADRID, May 18:** Spanish champion Barcelona capped a perfect season at home — 19 wins in 19 La Liga matches — with a 3-1 victory over Real Betis on Sunday as Robert Lewandowski bid an emotional farewell to Camp Nou.

Barcelona announced Saturday that the 37-year-old Lewandowski was leaving after four seasons.

Antoine Griezmann also said goodbye to Atletico Madrid's fans at the Metropolitan stadium before he moves to the United States to play in Major League Soccer. Atletico beat Girona 1-0.

Two goals by Raphinha and one by Joao Cancelo kept Barcelona perfect at home in the Spanish league. The Catalan club had already clinched its second straight league title two rounds ago.

There is one round of matches left. Lewandowski helped Barcelona win three Spanish league titles in

four seasons, including this campaign, and one Copa del Rey, while scoring an impressive 119 goals in 192 appearances.

It was an emotional farewell for the Poland striker, who, after the match, was thrown into the air by his teammates. They also lined up and applauded Lewandowski as he went toward the locker room.

"It has been an honour to play for this club," Lewandowski said. "We've enjoyed some great moments in these four years. I am very proud of everything we have achieved together. Today I say goodbye, but I will always carry Barcelona in my heart. Thank you so much, fans. Once a Barca fan, always a Barca fan."

**Griezmann's goodbye**

Griezmann is Atletico's all-time leading scorer.

The French forward apologised again to fans on Sunday for having left Atletico to play for rival

Barcelona. "I didn't realise how much I loved you here. I was very young. I made a mistake. I reconsidered, and we did everything we could to come back and enjoy it again," he said.

Atletico coach Diego Simeone praised the 35-year-old Griezmann. "Griezmann is possibly the best one to have ever played here," Simeone said. "He's an extraordinary guy, a genius. He's the most game-changing player that we've coached here."

**Mbappe starts, Sevilla loses but survives**

Sevilla avoided relegation despite a 1-0 loss to Real Madrid at home. Vinicius Junior scored for Madrid, which had already sealed second place.

Kylian Mbappe started for Madrid three days after saying coach Alvaro Arbeloa had made him the team's fourth-choice striker. He came off the bench in the win at Oviedo on Thursday in what was his return from an injury layoff.

It was a tight relegation fight coming into Sunday's matches, and Sevilla secured its salvation thanks to other results. Alaves also guaranteed more top-tier soccer next season with a 1-0 win at already relegated Oviedo. Five teams will enter next week-end's final round looking to avoid the drop: Levante, Osasuna, Elche, Girona and Mallorca.

Levante moved closer to safety with a 2-0 win over Mallorca and is 15th with 42 points, the same number of points as 16th-place Osasuna and 17th-place Elche. (AP)

## McIlroy has angry exchange with fan at PGA



**NEWTON SQUARE, May 18:** Rory McIlroy's frustrating final round at the PGA Championship boiled over with an angry exchange with a fan after a "U-S-A!" shout from the gallery at Aronimink Golf Club.

An errant shot out of heavy rough at the scoreable 16th hole derailed McIlroy's come-from-behind bid, and he appeared to respond to the shout by using an explosive while telling the fan to "shut up."

The exchange summarized the two-time Masters champion's confounding final round. He was not alone, as Jon Rahm, Cam Smith and Xander Schauffele had their chances and failed to catch Aaron Rai.

McIlroy said earlier in the week that the outlandish and abusive fan behavior he endures — like at the Ryder Cup last year — is usually limited to one week every four years, when the matches are contested in the U.S.

Sunday's interaction, far less severe than what he heard at Bethpage in New York, seemingly just came at a bad time.

McIlroy was three strokes behind Rai on the par-5 16th hole when his second shot out of rough

from 37 yard was short and bounded into a bunker. The two-time Masters champion spun, glared at the spectator, grumbled under his breath and seemed to point out the person to security.

McIlroy started the final round three strokes behind the leaders and struggled to make up ground while others were finding the Donald Ross layout scoreable. He managed just one birdie on the front nine, and after a bogey 5 at the drivable par-4 13th, managed one more birdie coming in, settling for a 69 to tie for seventh at 4 under.

McIlroy didn't comment on the fan interaction, but admitted he left some strokes on the course.

"I think not birdieing the two par-5s and making the bogey at the drivable par-4 13th," he said. "To me, I felt like I played the golf I needed to play the rest of the way. If I birdied the two par 5s and turned that 5 into a 3 on 13, the day looks very different."

Rahm, who started two strokes back, took the steam out of his three birdies on the front nine with two bogeys for a 1-under 34 at the turn. Still in contention on the back, the Spaniard reeled off six pars before making a birdie at the 16, getting to 6 under, but by that

point Rai was three strokes ahead. "Just wish I'd have done better with the speed of the greens," said Rahm, who needed 33 putts in the final round. "Just couldn't seem to get it to the hole, and that's the reason why I didn't hole any more putts."

The captain of LIV Golf's Legion XIII team found the good in his four rounds after barely making the cut at the Masters and finishing 38th.

"As far as I'm concerned, to be in the mix again and hit it as good as I did and perform as well as I did this weekend, it's been a great week," he said. "Four rounds and a par, even par, can't really ask too much more of myself. Just maybe obviously hole in a few more putts, which is not an easy task over here on these greens."

Smith, who reached the weekend after missing the cut in six straight majors, bolted to 5 under with birdies at Nos. 2, 4, and 9. But his round flattened out with seven straight pars on the back before dropping another stroke at the 17th.

The LIV player had weekend rounds of 68. Smith found early success when he moved to LIV with a victory in 2022 and two wins in 2023. He's winless since. "It feels great to play nice," Smith said. "You don't work hard to play crap, and it's frustrating, and the last couple of years have been frustrating. I feel like I've been putting in the work and not really getting anything out of it."

"Out there today, under the pressure I felt like I was able to trust it already. So lots of positive signs."

Schauffele failed to gain on the leaders with pars on the first eight holes before a birdie at the ninth. Trouble struck with bogeys at Nos. 11 and 13th, and two late birdies were not enough for the 2024 PGA and British Open winner. (AP)

**NEW DELHI, May 18:** Former world blitz and rapid champion Anna Muzychuk has declined to pick favourites for this year's men's and women's world championship titles with Indian players D Gukesh and R Vaishali set to face tough rivals later this year, saying psychological momentum and handling pressure could prove decisive in the summit clash.

Muzychuk, one of Ukraine's finest chess players who will begin her Norway Chess title defence in a few days in Oslo, said the World Championship clashes featuring defending champion Gukesh against challenger Javokhir Sindarov in the "Open" section and Vaishali against five-time world champion Ju Wenjun in the women's event promise high drama and excitement regardless of who emerges victorious.

"It will be very interesting clash. I'm looking forward to watching both of them (Open and Women's title showdowns) because the World Championship matches always stand out," said the 36-year-old Grandmaster, whose best in the classical World Championship format has been a runner-up finish in 2017. Having experienced the highs and lows, and pressures of elite chess first hand, the former world No. 2 said a lot can change before the title showdowns, as momentum and fortunes can swing dramatically over time.

"They (world championships) are always special and they bring a lot of excitement, especially for the spectators. It's very hard to say who will win or who is the favourite because there is still a lot of time. "I think players still have about half a year

## Bharat Singh Chauhan re-elected as CCA Chairman

**NEW DELHI, May 18:** Veteran Indian sports administrator Bharat Singh Chauhan has been re-elected unanimously as the Chairman of the Commonwealth Chess Association (CCA) for a four-year term.

The elections were held during the Annual General Body Meeting of the Commonwealth Chess Association in Wasakaduwa, Sri Lanka on Sunday.

"Mr. Chauhan's re-election reflects the confidence and trust reposed in his visionary leadership and longstanding dedication towards strengthening and promoting chess across the Commonwealth nations,"

said a press release from the CCA.

The 68-year-old Chauhan has previously served as the secretary of the All India Chess Federation (AICF). He is currently the Chairman of the International Chess Federation's (FIDE) Advisory Board and also the Deputy President of the Asian Chess Federation (ACF).

In elections held on Sunday, Malaysia's Akhramsyah Muammam Ubaidsh Sanusi was elected unopposed as the CCA's Deputy Chairman, while Sri Lanika's G Luxman Wijesuriya was picked General Secretary. (PTI)

## Telangana launches sports drive under 99-day action plan

**HYDERABAD, May 18:** Telangana Minister Vakati Srihari on Monday said the state government is encouraging sportspersons and taking measures to win gold medals at global events like the Olympics. Speaking at an event at LB Stadium here as part of the state government's 99-day special development programme, which began on March 6, he said the government had recently conducted various sports competitions under the "CM Cup," in which 3.5 lakh children from the village level participated.

The event aimed to encourage children to take up sports and to promote talented young athletes, he said. The government is emphasising improving sports infrastructure and facilities and encouraging coaches, he added. The sports minister said Chief Minister A Revanah Reddy envisions a state where children and youth steer clear of drugs and other vices and actively pursue sports. (PTI)

## Olympian Jennifer Paes, Leander's mother passes away

**NEW DELHI, May 18:** Former India basketball captain and Olympian Jennifer Paes, mother of tennis legend Leander Paes, passed away on Sunday after a prolonged battle with cancer. She was 72.

"She was terminally ill cancer patient and passed away on Sunday. The funeral service was held today at St Thomas Church in Kolkata," a family source said. Born Jennifer Dutton, she was the great-great-granddaughter of noted Bengali poet and dramatist Michael Madhusudan Dutt. Jennifer represented India in basketball at the 1972 Munich Olympics and later captained the national team, emerging as one of the prominent figures in Indian women's basketball. (PTI)



**NEW DELHI, May 18:** Rajasthan Royals batting coach Vikram Rathour says his team can still qualify for the IPL play-offs by winning its remaining two league matches, asserting that the side has the ability to beat any opponent if it plays to its potential.

Placed sixth in the standings with 12 points, RR face Lucknow Super Giants at home on May 19 before travelling to take on Mumbai Indians in their final league fixture on May 24.

"We are planning to win every match. It's not that we are waiting for the last two matches to win. Every game is important for us and we are trying to win," Rathour said at the post-match press conference.

"The situation is that we have to win both the games. Our belief is that if we are

playing to our potential, we can defeat any team. That is the mindset. We need to turn up and play our best cricket," he said.

Rathour also provided an update on senior spin-all rounder Ravindra Jadeja, saying the team management had opted to rest him as a precaution because of a knee niggle.

"He just had some niggle in his knee. They felt that if we give him one more game break, it will be good for him. That was the reason he was rested today," he said.

Backing the team's young batters, Rathour said players should focus on their individual strengths rather than trying to imitate others.

"Different players will bat differently. Anybody can succeed. You need to iden-

tify and know your strengths. If you back your strengths and play to your strengths, you can score runs," he said.

Referring to modern T20 batting approaches, Rathour pointed to Virat Kohli as an example of a player succeeding without relying solely on power-hitting.

"I wouldn't call him an out-and-out power-hitting player. That tells you there is scope for everybody to succeed, provided you have belief in your abilities," he said.

On RR's tactical decisions during the match, Rathour said the side had initially planned to use six bowling options but had to alter the strategy after losing wickets in clusters.

"Our initial idea was to take six bowlers. But because we lost those wickets too

quickly, we had to pick Dasun (Shanka) as an impact player. Inside, at that point of time, it's the captain who takes the call."

Rathour also revealed skipper Riyan Parag had been dealing with a hamstring niggle.

"Riyan is also having a niggle with his hamstring, so I am not sure how comfortable he was bowling," he said.

Praising opener Vaibhav Suryavanshi's aggressive batting, Rathour said the youngster remained a "special player" despite occasional weaknesses.

"Nobody is perfect in this world, so everybody will have some weakness here and there. He's a special player. He's provided us a really good start. I just hope he converts one innings and goes deeper," he said. (PTI)

# T20's six-hitting era turns cricket bat-making into a science of precision and customisation

**NEW DELHI, May 18:** Cricket's relentless shift towards power-hitting has sparked a quiet revolution far from the spotlight inside bat manufacturing units, where traditional willow craftsmanship is giving way to scientific precision as makers race to meet the demands of modern-day batters.

Driven by the high-stakes world of franchise cricket, where marginal gains can decide fortunes, manufacturers are now fine-tuning bats through moisture control, fibre analysis and personalised design to suit each player's strength, strokeplay and match situation.

The pressure to perform in an era of franchise valuations running into hundreds of crores of rupees, where every boundary can tilt match outcomes and justify massive team-building investments, has created an unprecedented demand for hyper-customised bats.

For now, manufacturers are already leaning heavily on scientific data, analyst feedback and player-specific profiling to design bats that can

maximise performance. And the day is not far when the inevitable Artificial Intelligence will help engineers make the bats, they say.

From powerplay specialists to death-over finishers, many top batters now travel with eight to 10 bats, each calibrated for a particular purpose. "Cricketers use different types of bats at different stages of the game, depending on the situation. On an average, they carry eight to 10 bats. They know each of their bats well and number them," Paras Anand, CEO of Sanspareils Greenlands (SG), one of India's leading bat manufacturers, told PTI in an interview.

The phenomenon underlines how cricket has evolved from the days when players often nurtured one trusted bat through entire seasons. Today's generation wants instant performance.

"Earlier batsmen used to prepare the bats by first playing in the nets and knocking them in. But today's generation wants a ready-to-use bat. Otherwise they say the bat is not good. Players say, 'I have a match in the evening, send me the bat be-



fore that," Anand explained.

That demand has transformed bat manufacturing into an exact science.

At SG's facilities in Meerut, imported English willow clefs undergo a carefully controlled air-drying process after reaching India.

"When the imported cleft reaches India, we do air drying. If you keep the wood in this hot and dry weather, it loses a little moisture, which helps reduce weight," Anand said.

The manipulation of moisture content has be-

come central to modern bat-making. The challenge for the bat makers is quite daunting as players want bigger profiles, thicker edges and a larger sweet spot, but without additional weight.

"Now we are actively playing around with the moisture content to get the big profile. The batter wants the big mass in the bat, but he still wants the bat to be light," Anand said.

That marks a sharp departure from earlier eras. "It is possible that there was more moisture in the bats Sunil Gavaskar used in the 1980s. Those bats were thinner and heavier," Anand said.

Gavaskar, the batting legend of the '70s and '80s, himself told PTI that he used bats weighing between 2.4 lb (1.08 kg) and 2.9 lb (1.32 kg).

The current generation of batters plays with bats ranging from 1.15 kg to 1.35 kg depending upon the format and nature of tracks.

"The weight of the bat is an individual preference. It depends on the comfort level," former India player and coach W V Raman pointed out. Under current ICC regulations, a bat cannot ex-

ceed 38 inches in length, 4.25 inches in width, 2.6 inches in depth, and 1.56 inch in edge thickness, with the handle restricted to 52 per cent of overall bat length.

Additionally, every bat used at the professional level must be able to pass through a standardised bat gauge used by umpires. The laws leave no official weight cap, giving manufacturers room to innovate within dimensional limits.

With the advent of the slam bang T20 format, what has changed most dramatically is the degree of personalisation. Customisation now factors in a player's physical conditioning, hand size, stroke range, swing path and even psychological comfort.

"Depending upon the strength of a cricketer, his requirement may be different. If he is muscular, he may want a balanced bat. If he is not very strong, he may want a bat that feels lighter in the hand," Anand said.

Power hitters often prefer more weight concentrated lower down the blade for elevation. (PTI)

## Royals seek all-round improvement in must-win game against LSG

**JAIPUR, May 18:** Their playoff hopes hanging by a thread, the Rajasthan Royals will need an all-round improvement against the out-of-contention Lucknow Super Giants to stay alive in the Indian Premier League here on Tuesday.

At the high-scoring Sawai Mansingh Stadium, Royals are yet to win a game this season and the final fixture here is a do or die one for the home team.

Following Tuesday's fixture, the Royals' last game is also against a vanquished outfit - the Mumbai Indians.

In Delhi on Sunday night, RR should have out-batted Delhi Capitals but a lower order collapse cost them the match in which their fielding and bowling was also fairly ordinary.

Royals have been relying heavily on 15-year-old Vaibhav Sooryavanshi for flying starts but the youngster has not got enough support from Yashasvi Jaiswal at the other end. Dhruv Jurel has played some sublime knocks but the one on Sunday nights was a rather subdued one with wickets falling at the other end.

Captain Riyan Parag was underwhelming in the first half of the IPL but has picked up pace in the recent games. He would want his side to be much more clinical in the last five overs with the bat.

The catching and fielding have generally been poor in the IPL and Royals too have been guilty of grassing easy chances.

Post the loss to Delhi Capitals, Parag had



expressed his frustration with the team not playing to its potential in the business end of the tournament.

"The fielding was poor. If we keep on playing like this, we shouldn't be in contention for the top four," Parag had stated while acknowledging that the team's fate is no longer in its own hands.

"I think that's depending on a lot of other teams as well. That is not how I like to lead. That is not how I like to speak to my team as well," he admitted when talking about the playoff chances

"So if we do not qualify, it's our fault. No-one else's. And yeah, next two games, we'll see what we can do better and hopefully get two wins," added Parag, who has been nursing a hamstring niggle.

LSG, dealing with issues of their own, come into the game on the back of a rare win in the tournament.

They beat Chennai Super Kings at home on May 15 and would be looking to play party-poopers in their remaining two games (last one against Punjab Kings).

Batting has been their weakest link but

Mitchell Marsh played a blinder against CSK to script a welcome win.

Rishabh Pant, who has not found a settled position in the batting order throughout the season, did not come out to bat in the last game, giving time in the middle to other batters.

The season is done and dusted for LSG but wins in the remaining games would lessen the pain of an otherwise forgettable campaign.

**Squads:**

**Rajasthan Royals:** Shubham Dubey, Shimron Hetmyer, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Dhruv Jurel, Lhuan-dre Pretorius, Riyan Parag (c), Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, Donovan Ferreira, Ravindra Jadeja, Jofra Archer, Nandre Burger, Tushar Deshpande, Kwen Maphaka, Sandeep Sharma, Ravi Bishnoi, Sushant Mishra, Aman Rao Perala, Adam Milne, Kuldeep Sen, Dasun Shanaka, Yudhvir Singh Charak, Ravi Singh, Vignesh Puthur, Brijesh Sharma.

**Lucknow Super Giants:** Rishabh Pant (c), Abdul Samad, Ayush Badoni, Matthew Breetzke, Himmat Singh, Aiden Markram, Nicholas Pooran, Arshin Kulkarni, Mitchell Marsh, Shahbaz Ahmed, Avesh Khan, Mohammed Shami, Prince Yadav, Digvesh Singh Rathi, Mayank Prabhoo Yadav, Wanindu Hasaranga, Anrich Nortje, Josh Inglis, Mohsin Khan, Naman Tiwari, Akash Maharaj Singh, Mukul Choudhary, Manimaran Sid-dharth, Arjun Sachin Tendulkar, Akshat Raghuvanshi. (PTI)

## India seek redemption against French challenge at Malaysia Masters

**KUALA LUMPUR, May 18:** A fresh India-versus-France battle awaits in the men's singles competition and the Indian shuttlers will look to avenge their recent Thomas Cup semifinal defeat when the Malaysia Masters Super 500 tournament begins here on Tuesday.

India had won a bronze medal after suffering a 0-3 loss to France in the Thomas Cup semifinals in Horsens, Denmark earlier this month, losing all three singles matches. This week, three Indian singles players will once again face French opponents and will be eager to turn the tables.

While star Indian shuttler Lakshya Sen, who had missed the Thomas Cup tie due to an elbow injury, will open against Indonesia's Moh Zaki Ubaidillah, Tharun Manneppalli will take on France's Toma Junior Popov, Kiran George will face seventh seed Alex Lanier, and HS Prannoy will meet Christo Popov. (PTI)

## Would love to own a team in WPL: Mohit Burman

**NEW DELHI, May 18:** The BCCI may have ruled out an immediate expansion of the Women's Premier League (WPL) but IPL side Punjab Kings co-owner Mohit Burman says the franchise would love to own a team in the four-season-old tournament at some point.

The WPL currently has three teams owned by IPL franchises -- Mumbai Indians, Royal Challengers Bengaluru and Delhi Capitals.

While the BCCI has no immediate plans to add to the existing five-team WPL, Burman is bullish about the growth of the game globally and would be happy to invest in the league when the opportunity arises.

"The WPL has already established itself as an important platform for the women's game in a very short period of time. The growth of women's cricket has been fantastic to witness," Burman, who owns 48 per cent stake in Punjab Kings, told PTI.

"As for investment decisions, every group evaluates opportuni-



ties differently depending on timing, strategic priorities and long-term business considerations. Not investing initially should not be interpreted as a lack of belief in women's cricket.

"Personally, I think the future of the women's game is extremely bright. We would love to own a women's IPL team," he said.

Burman feels the recent success of WPL and Indian women's team has generated a lot of interest at the grassroots level.

The Harmanpreet Kaur-led India

won the women's ODI World Cup for the first time last year and is being considered a strong contender for the T20 world crown which will be contested next month in England.

"The quality of cricket, audience interest and commercial response have all exceeded expectations in many ways. What is especially encouraging is the impact it is having at the grassroots level," Burman said.

"Young girls today can see women cricketers as major sport-

ing icons and viable professional athletes, and that changes the future of the sport entirely," he added, referring to the sharp increase in the brand value of women cricketers after last year's World Cup triumph.

Earlier this year, Chennai Super Kings CEO Kasi Viswanathan too expressed the storied franchise's interest to invest in women's cricket.

"Not immediately, but certainly in the coming years, CSK will expand its footprint. Our first target will be women's cricket. We may also go into other sports over time," Viswanathan had said at a conclave.

IPL chairman Arun Dhimal had told PTI last year that the board had no immediate plans to add teams to WPL.

"To further strengthen this tournament for the time being, we want to consolidate before we take a call on further addition of any team. There are no immediate plans (to add teams)," Dhimal had said. (PTI)

## Starc a role model, says Badani as DC keep IPL play-off hopes alive

**NEW DELHI, May 18:** Delhi Capitals head coach Hemang Badani praised senior pacer Australian quick Mitchell Starc for his influence on younger players after the team kept its IPL play-off hopes alive with a home win over Rajasthan Royals on Sunday.

The five-wicket victory took Delhi Capitals to 12 points and seventh place in the standings, with the side now needing to win its final league match against Kolkata Knight Riders on May 24 to stay in contention for a play-off berth.

Badani said Starc's professionalism and preparation made him one of the finest role models in the game.

Starc took four wickets and it was his three-wicket over that tilted the game in Capitals' favour after Royals had a flying start.

"He's possibly one of the best role models anyone can have in sport. His work ethic, his preparation before the game, with his own plans and his training, is above par," Badani said at the post-match press conference.

"I don't even see that with a lot of the younger boys. That's the reason why he's sustained for so long."

The DC coach also highlighted Starc's role in mentoring younger bowlers in the squad.

"He's always talking to them, trying to pass on knowledge, how can you do reverse swing, how do I hold lengths, what do I do when a batter is going hard. There's immense conversation that Starc brings to the table," he said.

Badani said the franchise had brought Starc into the squad because of his ability to contribute across all phases of an innings.

"He was somebody who liked pressure, somebody who could hit a long ball and at the same time bowl through all three phases. If required, he could even bowl in the power play, which you haven't seen much of it yet," he said.

"And if you go back and see the recent Ashes series, he single-handedly won them the Ashes."

Referring to recent team changes, Badani said the management had opted to back younger players after some senior members failed to deliver consistently. (PTI)

## 'BCCI not a public authority under RTI Act': CIC overturns its 2018 order

**NEW DELHI, May 18:** The BCCI is not a public authority under the Right to Information Act, thus it is not liable to answer any queries under the transparency law, the Central Information Commission held on Monday, overturning its own 2018 order in this regard.

Information Commissioner P R Ramesh said that the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), despite performing important public functions relating to cricket administration and India's representation in international tournaments, cannot be treated as a public authority as it is neither owned, controlled, nor substantially financed by the government.

"The BCCI cannot be classified as a 'public authority' within the meaning of Section 2(h) of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, and the provisions of the Act are therefore inapplicable to it in the facts and circumstances of the present case," Ramesh said in the order, dismissing an appeal seeking information about the provisions and authority under which the BCCI represents India and selects players for national and international tournaments.

The ruling marked a reversal of a 2018 order of the then-information commissioner and a noted law professor, M Sridhar Acharyulu, who held BCCI to be a public authority and directed its president, secretary and committee of administrators to designate



central public information officers, assistant public information officers and first appellate authorities under the RTI Act.

The Central Information Commission (CIC) had also directed the BCCI to proactively disclose information under Section 4 of the law and furnish point-wise replies to the RTI applicant.

The BCCI, however, had challenged the 2018 order before the Madras High Court, which, in September 2025, remitted the matter back to the CIC for reconsideration in light of the Supreme Court's observa-

tions in the BCCI vs Cricket Association of Bihar case and said the Commission should pass fresh orders after re-examining the legal position.

Revisiting the issue, the CIC said that the BCCI is a private autonomous body registered under the Tamil Nadu Societies Registration Act, which was not established by the Constitution, Parliament, a state legislature or through a government notification.

It said the cricket body functions independently through revenue generated from media rights, sponsorship deals, ticket sales, broad-

casting agreements and commercial cricket operations.

"There exists no control of the government over the functions, finance, administration, management and affairs of the BCCI. Thus, the status of public authority cannot be given to the BCCI," the Commission said.

Rejecting the argument that BCCI's role in selecting the national teams and regulating cricket in India gives it a public authority character, the Commission said, "The RTI Act does not include 'public function' as a criterion for determining a public authority."

The case stemmed from a 2017 RTI application seeking details on the authority under which the BCCI represents India, selects players and enjoys government support for cricket infrastructure and security arrangements.

The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports had replied that the information sought was not available with it, and the application could not be transferred to the BCCI as it had not declared itself a 'public authority'.

The CIC relied on Supreme Court rulings, including Zee Telefilms Ltd vs Union of India and Thalappalam Service Cooperative Bank Ltd vs State of Kerala, to conclude that mere regulatory oversight or public importance does not satisfy the RTI Act's test for a public authority unless an organisation is substantially controlled or financed by the government. (PTI)

## Vinesh seeks relief from judiciary

### Delhi High Court to study WFI selection policy before order



**NEW DELHI, May 18:** The Delhi High Court on Monday said it would examine the Wrestling Federation of India's (WFI) selection policy before passing any order on wrestler Vinesh Phogat's plea seeking a fair opportunity to make a comeback to competitive wrestling.

The matter came up for hearing days after Vinesh approached the court on May 14, challenging her exclusion from the national wrestling selection process amid an ongoing dispute with the WFI.

Vinesh had last week reached Gonda in Uttar Pradesh for the National Open Ranking tournament, which was supposed to be her comeback event but the federation asked her to first reply to the show-cause notice.

A frustrated Vinesh then knocked the doors of the judiciary. "During the hearing, the court asked the former World Championships medalist to respond to the show-cause notice issued by the federation," a source closely following the developments told PTI.

"The court said that it would study the WFI's eligibility and trial norms before arriving at a judgment on whether Vinesh should be allowed to participate in the upcoming selection events."

The case adds another chapter to the prolonged standoff between one of India's most decorated wrestlers and the national federation.

Vinesh, who announced her return to the mat earlier this year after retiring following the Paris Olympics heartbreak, revealed she is eligible to compete as per International Testing Agency (ITA) even as WFI said that she was ineligible.

The WFI insisted that until she replies to the show cause notice, which accused her of violation of WFI constitution and UWW rules, it cannot allow her an opportunity to come back.

The controversy has also split opinion within the wrestling community.

It is learnt that a group of women wrestlers has separately approached the court, arguing that Vinesh should not be granted a direct route back into the national setup and must undergo the same qualification process as other competitors.

Their intervention reflects growing concerns among active wrestlers over maintaining parity in the selection system ahead of major international events, including the Asian Games cycle.

The WFI's stance has received backing from sections of the wrestling establishment and even international governing circles, while Olympic medalist Sakshi Malik and Bajrang Punia have publicly supported Vinesh's demand for an opportunity to compete. (PTI)