

**6** WORLD

**8** NATION

- One dead, 36 injured after fire, explosions at New York City shipyard
- Trump veers off-topic during speech in New York that was supposed to be on economy
- Centre offers constitutional safeguards, legislative body for Ladakh
- US Secretary of State Marco Rubio meets Prime Minister Modi

## CM hails Eidgah committees' appeal against cow slaughter during Eid-ul-Zuha

# 'Voluntary initiatives to strengthen communal harmony'

GUWAHATI, May 23: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday welcomed appeals by several Eidgah committees in the state urging the Muslim community to refrain from cow slaughter during the upcoming Eid-ul-Zuha celebrations, saying such "voluntary actions" would strengthen communal harmony in the state.

"Several Eidgah and Kabristhan committees in Hojai, Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Udharbond and other places have given an appeal to refrain from cow slaughter during Bakrid, and have also explained the legal and religious reasons behind it," Sarma said in a post on X.

He welcomed this initiative of "respecting the sentiments of the majority Sanatan community".

Sarma maintained that "such voluntary actions will go a long way in strengthening communal harmony in Assam". "I hope other Eidgah committees will also issue similar



appeals," the chief minister added.

He also shared news clippings of Muslim communities in Udharbond in Cachar district and Dhubri appealing to avoid cow slaughter during the ensuing Bakrid, or Eid-ul-

Zuha, celebrations.

An official statement from Dhubri had said on Thursday that a preparatory meeting was chaired by the District Commissioner, Megha Nidhi Dahal, to discuss

arrangements for the upcoming celebrations, scheduled for May 28. Dhubri had witnessed communal tension following the celebration last year, leading to issuing of shoot-at-sight orders at night in this district bordering Bangladesh.

Dahal urged all departments concerned to discharge their duties with utmost sincerity and diligence to ensure the smooth conduct of the festivities across the district.

He directed the health department to station ambulances at heavily crowded venues, and instructed that doctors, nurses and other medical personnel remain on duty at government healthcare facilities throughout the day.

The district veterinary officer was asked to carry out inspection and certification duties as required.

The DC also briefed attendees on the provisions of the Assam Cattle Preservation Act, 2021, emphasising that it strictly prohibits

the slaughter, sale and transportation of cattle without valid permits and except under specific conditions. He made it clear that no exception or relaxation to the Act would be permitted.

Dahal stressed that since any permissible slaughter must take place exclusively at certified slaughterhouses and there are no such facilities in the district, no cattle slaughter will be permitted within the district. He urged the representatives of mosques and Eidgahs to inform their respective communities about the provisions of the Act, so as to prevent any untoward incidents.

Senior Superintendent of Police Debashis Borah, also present at the meeting, assured that Dhubri Police would remain fully vigilant and would take prompt and necessary action against any third-party elements attempting to create a disturbance or disrupt communal harmony. (PTI)

## ACS officer held on graft charges

### Over ₹ 1.66 cr in cash seized



GUWAHATI, May 23: An Assam Civil Service (ACS) officer has been arrested on graft charges and over ₹ 1.66 crore in cash and fixed deposits worth another ₹ 86 lakh have been seized, along with other investment documents, a police officer said on Saturday.

The accused, Lachit Kumar Das, posted as additional director, Land

Records, Guwahati, was apprehended by sleuths of the Directorate of Vigilance and Anti-Corruption, acting on a complaint alleging that the officer had demanded a bribe for issuing an NOC for land sale permission. The police officer (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Himanta calls on Sitharaman

GUWAHATI, May 23: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday called on Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in the national capital, during which they discussed the roadmap for accelerating the state's economic growth.

Sarma thanked the Union Finance Minister for the support extended to Assam over the past five years.

"Called upon Hon'ble Union Finance Minister Smt. @nsitharaman Ji in New Delhi today. I thanked her for the constant support extended to Assam over the last five years and discussed the roadmap for Assam's growth and development journey in the coming years," Sarma said in a post on X. The Chief Minister's Office, in a separate post on the social media platform, said the two leaders discussed the Assam government's roadmap for accelerating economic growth and transforming the state into a major growth engine of Northeast India. The BJP-led NDA (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Himanta calls on Sitharaman

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, May 23: Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) president and Jorhat Lok Sabha MP Gaurav Gogoi on Friday said the Leader of the Opposition (LoP) in the Assam Legislative Assembly would be selected soon, adding that the All India Congress Committee (AICC) has deputed observers to oversee the process.

Addressing mediapersons here after a review meeting with district party leaders over the party's poll debacle in the state, Gogoi, who is also the Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, said the APCC is awaiting the itinerary of the observers coming to Assam for supervising the LoP selection process. He stated that the party would (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Ex-Assam MLA arrested for 'inflammatory' remarks against CM Himanta ahead of Eid-ul-Zuha

### Ali Akbar Miah warns brutal loggerheads with 'men in uniform'; arrested after video goes viral

GUWAHATI, May 23: A former Assam MLA has been arrested for making purported inflammatory remarks against Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and police ahead of Eid-ul-Zuha celebrations, an officer said on Saturday.

Ali Akbar Miah, former legislator of Bilasipara West constituency in Dhubri district, allegedly made the comments in a video that went viral on social media, the police officer said.

Miah was arrested on Friday. PTI, however, could not independently verify the authenticity of the video.

Miah, who had unsuccessfully contested last month's Assembly elections on an AIUDF ticket, is heard saying in the video that the chief minister should not take an adamant stance and be more understanding.

Miah purportedly said that if po-

lice try to prevent animal sacrifice being made privately, people could end up fatally attacking the men in uniform.

His comments come in the backdrop of several Eidgah committees in the state, including in Dhubri, appealing to the Muslim community to refrain from slaughtering cows during the Eid-ul-Zuha celebrations.

Sarma, appreciating the initiative, said such "voluntary actions will go a long way in strengthening communal harmony in Assam".

The police officer said the video was found during routine social media screening at the district level.

"He has been arrested as per relevant penal provisions," he said, adding that further details of why Miah had made the purported comments would be known after further investigation. (PTI)

## Sonowal stresses role of youth in building self-reliant India at Rozgar Mela



GUWAHATI, May 23: Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal on Saturday emphasised the role of the youth in building a self-reliant and developed India.

He said the youth are the driving force behind the country's accelerated growth journey and urged them to continue contributing

the key force powering the country's growth journey."

He said continuous initiatives such as Startup India, Digital India and skill development programmes have empowered the younger generation with confidence and strengthened the path towards Aatmanirbhar Bharat.

Sonowal said with the Rozgar Melas, the Modi-led government has provided employment opportunities to lakhs of young men and women through a transparent and merit-based recruitment system.

"The transparent recruitment process has instilled a renewed sense of trust among the youth. We firmly believe that the creativity, energy and dedication of the youth will take the nation to new heights in the journey towards Amrit Kaal, with the goal of establishing India as a developed and leading global nation by 2047," Sonowal added.

The Union minister handed appointment letters to 177 candidates in various (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

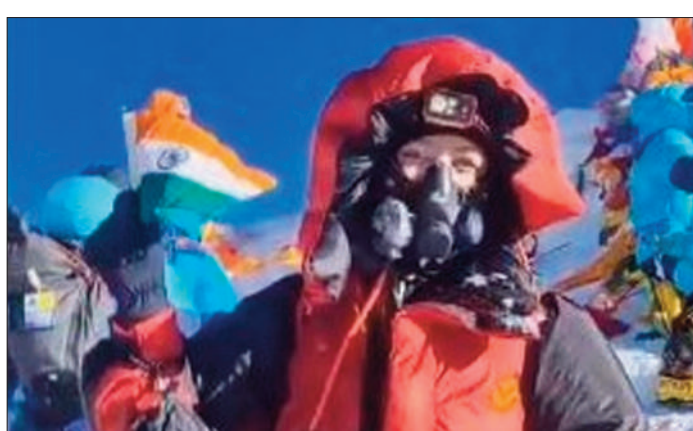
## 21 gm of heroin, 10,000 Yaba tablets seized, 2 arrested

GUWAHATI, May 23: Two persons have been arrested and 21 gm of heroin and 10,000 Yaba tablets seized from their possession in Assam's Cachar district, officials said on Saturday.

They said the seizure and arrests were made from a boat on Barak River on Friday.

"Intercepting a mechanised boat on the Barak River at Lakhipur yesterday, @cacharpolice seized 10,000 Yaba tablets and 21 g of heroin alongside two arrests," the chief minister's office (CMO) said in an X post. "HCM Dr. @himantabiswa has applauded the operational team for their alertness," it added. (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Rupamoni Gorh becomes first woman from Assam to scale Mt Everest



GUWAHATI/NORTH LAKHIMPUR, May 23: Rupamoni Gorh has become the first woman from Assam to scale Mount Everest, achieving the feat as part of an all-

women expedition team of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Saturday.

Gorh, a resident of Lilabari in

Lakhimpur district, reached the summit of the world's highest peak on Thursday.

Sarma said the state was proud of her historic accomplishment.

"Assam's daughter has reached the top of the world. Heartiest congratulations to Rupamoni Gorh for becoming the first woman from Assam to scale Mount Everest as part of the ITBP all-women expedition team," he said in a social media post.

"Her historic feat is a moment of immense pride for Assam and an inspiration for our youth to dream big and conquer new heights," he added. Born into a farmer's family, Gorh grew up in Lilabari with modest means. Her father, Joysing Gorh, is engaged in agriculture, while her (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Rubio conveys Trump's White House invite to Modi, discusses bilateral ties and West Asia crisis

NEW DELHI, May 23: India and the US will continue to work closely for the global good, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Saturday, after US Secretary of State Marco Rubio briefed him on the West Asia crisis and discussed ways to bolster bilateral ties in crucial sectors, including defence, strategic technologies, trade and energy security.

Rubio, who met Modi shortly after landing in New Delhi, invited the prime minister on behalf of President Donald Trump to visit the White House in the "near future", even as the top American diplomat described India as the "cornerstone" of Washington's approach towards the Indo-Pacific.

The US Secretary of State's four-day trip to India -- aimed at holding wide-ranging talks with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and attending a Quad foreign ministers' conclave -- is largely seen as an attempt to recalibrate bilateral relations, which have faced headwinds since mid-last year.

"Happy to receive the US Secretary of State, Mr. Marco Rubio. We discussed sustained progress in the India-US Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership

and issues related to regional and global peace and security," Modi said on social media.

"India and the United States will continue to work closely for the global good," he said.

The US State Department said Secretary Rubio and PM Modi agreed to deepen trade and defence cooperation and accelerate collaboration on critical and emerging technologies.

After the meeting with the prime minister, Rubio, addressing an event at the US embassy, described India as an "incredibly important partner" for the US and indicated that the two sides are planning to make certain important announcements in the coming months to further solidify the relations.

The top diplomat, in his address, delved into various aspects of India-US relations and touched upon how the friendship between PM Modi and President Trump is driving the ties forward.

"The connection between the leaders is incredibly important. These are two very serious leaders who are focussed not just on the short-term, but on the long-term. I think that that is (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Conservation efforts help revival of endangered dholes in Assam: Himanta

GUWAHATI, May 23: The endangered Asiatic wild dogs, or dholes, have returned to Assam's Kaziranga-Karbi Anglong landscape in larger numbers after a camera trap had captured the image of a lone member of the species four years ago, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Saturday.

Attributing the rise in the population of dholes to the government's conservation efforts, Sarma said his administration was working towards creating conditions in which wildlife could thrive again.

"A silent and highly efficient predator, the dhole once roamed freely across our forests before fading from the Kaziranga-Karbi Anglong landscape," Sarma said in a post on X. "But nature has its own way of returning. Through consistent efforts to protect and expand forest cover, strengthen habitat connectivity and free up encroached lands, we are creating conditions where wildlife can thrive again," he added.

Sarma said that from a "lone camera trap image in 2022 to direct sightings and now confirmation of a pack in 2026, this is a powerful story of revival", as he shared the state's



success story of wildlife conservation on the social media site.

"The return of an apex predator like the Dhole is not just about one species. It signals a healthier ecosystem, stronger connectivity and the success of sustained conservation efforts," the CM added.

Dholes are wild members of the dog family, found in the forests of South and Southeast Asia.

They are listed as 'Endangered' by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) due to decreasing population. (PTI)

## UN conference on nuclear non-proliferation treaty ends without agreement

### US-Iran dispute over Tehran's nuclear programme cited as key obstacle

UNITED NATIONS, May 23: A four-week United Nations conference reviewing the treaty to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons ended Friday without agreement because of what experts said was a dispute between the United States and Iran over Iran's nuclear programme.

Vietnam's UN Ambassador Do Hung Viet, who chaired the conference, announced that there was no consensus among the 191 parties to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty on even a watered-down final document. He did not say which country or countries blocked a consensus.

It was the third failure in a row at a conference reviewing the NPT, considered the cornerstone of global nonproliferation and disarmament. At the last treaty review in August 2022, Russia blocked agreement on a final document over its February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and references to Moscow's occupation of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, Europe's largest.



Tensions over Tehran's nuclear programme escalated ahead of the Iran war, which began with US and Israeli airstrikes on February 28. President Donald Trump has said the war was aimed at preventing Iran from building a nuclear weapon. Iran has enriched uranium

to near weapons-grade levels but insists its programme is only for civilian purposes.

The US and Iran have clashed since the opening of the review conference on April 27. The US accused Iran of showing "contempt" for its commitments

under the treaty, while Iran said US and Israeli attacks on its nuclear facilities violated international law.

Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Washington-based Arms Control Association, said differences over other potential deal-breaking issues -- such as nuclear testing, disarmament and the impact of a nuclear explosion -- were dealt with largely in favour of the five major nuclear powers: the US, Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom.

Kimball closely followed the conference, as did Britain's Rebecca Johnson, founding executive director of the Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy. Before the failure to reach consensus was announced, both said the US-Iran dispute was the main roadblock. Iran is a party to the NPT, which requires countries to open all nuclear sites to inspection by the UN nuclear watchdog agency. But Iran has not given inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency access to nuclear sites that were bombed by the US last June. (AP)

# Petrol, diesel, CNG prices hiked again; rates jump nearly ₹ 5/litre in 10 days

**NEW DELHI, May 23:** Petrol and diesel prices were raised by 87-91 paise per litre on Saturday, taking the cumulative increase in retail fuel rates to nearly ₹ 5 a litre in under 10 days as state-owned firms passed on soaring international oil prices.

Alongside, compressed natural gas (CNG) prices were raised by ₹ 1 per kg, marking the third increase in recent days and taking the cumulative hike to ₹ 4 per kg.

The latest revision pushed petrol prices higher by 87 paise per litre and diesel by up to 91 paise across the country, according to industry sources.

The back-to-back increases follow a prolonged freeze in retail fuel prices and come amid elevated crude oil prices in the global market, tightening refining margins, and a weaker rupee, which has sharply raised the cost of imports.

Petrol price was increased by 87 paise in Delhi to ₹ 99.51 per litre from ₹ 98.64 earlier. Similarly, diesel price was hiked by 91 paise to ₹ 92.49 a litre from ₹ 91.58 previously.

With the latest hike, petrol and diesel prices have risen to nearly ₹ 5 a litre since the state-owned oil marketing companies on May 15 ended the hiatus in rate revision, stoking concerns over inflationary pressures and higher transportation costs across the economy.

Petrol and diesel prices were increased by ₹ 3 per litre each on May 15 and 90 paise a litre on May 19.

CNG price in Delhi was increased to ₹ 81.09 per kg from ₹ 80.09, according to information posted by Indraprastha Gas Ltd on its website.

Rates have increased in all the neighbouring cities as well.

This is the third increase in CNG prices, and together with the



earlier hikes of ₹ 2 per kg on May 15 and ₹ 1 per kg on May 17, it takes the cumulative increase to ₹ 4 per kg.

On all three occasions, private fuel retailers like Nayara Energy swiftly matched the price increases announced by their state-owned rivals, raising petrol and diesel rates by a similar quantum.

The latest increases came on top of hikes effected earlier by private retailers ahead of the first fuel price revision on May 15 by state-run oil companies.

Nayara Energy had raised petrol and diesel prices by ₹ 5 and ₹ 3 per litre, respectively, in March, while Shell increased petrol prices by ₹ 7.41 a litre and diesel by as much as ₹ 25 per litre from April 1.

Jio-BP, the fuel retailing joint venture of Reliance Industries Ltd and BP Plc, has, however, moved rates at its pumps in tandem with PSUs.

After Saturday's increase, petrol at PSU pumps in Mumbai now costs ₹ 108.49 per litre and diesel ₹ 95.02, and Kolkata prices rose to ₹ 110.64 and ₹ 97.02, respectively. In Chennai, petrol is priced at ₹ 105.31 and diesel at ₹ 96.98.

Prices vary across states due to

local taxes. State-owned Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) together control 90 per cent of India's fuel market.

The back-to-back increases come after global crude oil prices surged more than 50 per cent since late February, following US-Israeli strikes on Iran and disruptions to shipments through the Strait of Hormuz, a critical global oil transit route.

Fuel retailers had kept pump prices low despite rising input costs, a move the government said was aimed at shielding consumers from inflation.

Opposition parties, however, accused the government of delaying price revisions until after key state elections.

The May 15 increase came after the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) expanded its electoral footprint by winning three of five state and UT elections, including West Bengal.

Despite the hikes, fuel retailers continue to absorb significant losses.

Petroleum Ministry's Joint Secretary Sujata Sharma had earlier

this week stated that the May 15 increase reduced losses by about a fourth, but state-run oil firms were still losing around ₹ 750 crore per day.

According to Crisil, oil marketing companies were losing about ₹ 10 per litre on petrol and ₹ 13 per litre on diesel even after the earlier hike.

Petrol and diesel prices are now at their highest levels since May 2022.

Rates had remained frozen since April 2022 except for a ₹ 2-per-litre cut in March 2024 ahead of national elections.

The fuel price increases come amid broader efforts by the government to contain India's oil import bill and reduce fuel consumption.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, last week, urged citizens and government departments to conserve fuel, encourage remote working and reduce non-essential travel as elevated energy prices pressure foreign exchange reserves and threaten to widen the current account deficit.

Several state governments have already directed departments to curb travel and reduce office attendance.

Compressed natural gas (CNG) prices have also risen by ₹ 3 per kg in two instalments within this period.

Industry officials said the latest revisions appeared calibrated to partially ease pressure on oil companies without triggering a sharp inflation shock, though they acknowledged that the increases would add to price pressures.

India's retail inflation accelerated to 3.48 per cent in April from 3.40 per cent in March, while wholesale inflation climbed to a 42-month high of 8.3 per cent, driven largely by higher fuel and energy costs. (PTI)

# LG Electronics India posts highest-ever quarterly revenue in Q4 FY26

Revenue rises 8.1 pc YoY to ₹80.54 billion; premium products and demand recovery drive growth



**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, May 23:** LG Electronics India Limited (LGE India) has announced its financial results for the fourth quarter of FY26, reporting its highest-ever quarterly revenue driven by strong demand recovery and continued premiumisation across product categories.

According to the company, revenue from operations during Q4 FY26 stood at ₹80.54 billion, registering an 8.1 per cent year-on-year growth from ₹74.48 billion in the corresponding quarter of FY25. The company reported EBITDA of ₹9.45 billion with an EBITDA margin of 11.7 per cent, while profit after tax (PAT) stood at ₹6.93 billion.

For the full financial year FY26, LGE India recorded revenue from operations of ₹246.05 billion, reflecting a 1 per cent growth over the previous year.

The company stated that the strong quarterly performance was supported by broad-based demand recovery and increased consumer preference for premium products such as large-panel televisions, French-door refrigerators, fully automatic washing machines and 5-star-rated air conditioners.

LGE India also highlighted its continued focus on its "Make-in-India, Make-for-India and Make-India-Global" strategy, while maintaining leadership across major product categories. The company noted that its manufacturing facilities have signed long-term solar power purchase agreements with Hinduja Renewable Energy Private Limited and Suresure Energy Private Limited for its first captive renewable energy project in India.

Hong Ju Jeon said the company's record quarterly

revenue reflected the strength of the brand and the resilience of its business model despite global challenges. He added that the company would continue investing in premiumisation and expanding exports of its Essential Series products to 22 countries across Asia, the Middle East and Africa in FY27.

In the Home Appliance segment, revenue grew 5.7 per cent year-on-year to ₹65.16 billion during Q4 FY26, with strong demand reported for fully automatic washing machines, French-door refrigerators, dishwashers and energy-efficient air conditioners. The Home Entertainment segment recorded 19.6 per cent growth, reaching ₹15.37 billion in revenue, supported by rising demand for large-screen televisions and increased viewership during the Cricket World Cup.

The company further stated that it plans to strengthen its B2B business and expand production capacities to meet growing domestic and overseas demand in the coming years.

Contd. from Page 1...

## Himanta calls on Sitharaman

government recently returned to power in Assam for a third successive term following the Assembly elections, with Sarma helming the administration for the second consecutive time. (PTI)

## Sonowal stresses role of youth

departments, including Indian Railways, Department of Posts, Oil India Limited, State Bank of India, Ministry of Defence, and Airports Authority of India at the programme. (PTI)

## ACS officer held on graft

said Das had allegedly demanded ₹ 1 lakh as bribe for issuing the No Objection Certification (NOC), and unwilling to pay the money, the complainant approached the Vigilance Directorate. A trap was laid by the Vigilance sleuths on Thursday at the ACS officer's Guwahati office and he was caught red-handed in his chamber while accepting ₹ 45,000 as part of the demanded bribe, the officer said.

A case has been registered by the directorate. After his apprehension, Vigilance sleuths conducted searches in his two houses in Guwahati.

During the first search operation, ₹ 48.38 lakh in cash was retrieved from a locker inside one house and fixed deposits amounting to ₹ 80 lakh in the names of the officer and his family members were seized.

"Several general life insurance policies, postal life insurance policies in the names of him and his family members were found. Several bank accounts and documents of landed property have also been found, and analysis of these is underway," the police officer added.

The directorate, in a social media post, said, another search was conducted in another house of Das on Friday, and over ₹ 1.18 crore in cash was seized.

"On 22-05-2026, a team of @DIR\_VAC\_ASSAM again conducted a search in another house of Lachit Kumar Das, ACS, ADLR located at Queen's Garden, Ramibagan, Beltola and recovered cash ₹ 1,18,30,000/- & some land related documents," it said. (PTI)

## 21 gm of heroin, 10,000 Yaba

Yaba tablets are illegal in India as they contain methamphetamine, a Schedule II substance under the Controlled Substances Act. (PTI)

## Rupamoni Gorh becomes

mother, Kamalawati, works as an Anganwadi assistant. A graduate in Arts, she joined the ITBP in 2020 and continued to pursue her childhood passion for adventure and mountaineering, her family said. (PTI)

## Rubio conveys Trump's White House

important to note, because it's a key part of the foundation, the relationship between our countries," Rubio said. The US Secretary of State also emphasised Washington's seriousness to expand cooperation under the Quad framework.

US State Department Spokesperson Tommy Pigott, referring to Rubio's meeting with Modi, said the Secretary of State underscored the strategic importance of the US-India partnership, the strong personal ties between the US President and the Prime Minister, as well as the profound economic and commercial opportunities for the two sides.

"The Secretary and the Prime Minister discussed the current situation in the Middle East. The Secretary emphasised that the United States will not let Iran hold the global energy market hostage and affirmed that US energy products have the potential to diversify India's energy supply," Pigott said.

Modi and Rubio also reflected upon bilateral achievements including significant investments that advance the President and the Prime Minister's "Mission 500" to double trade by 2030, he said.

According to an Indian readout, Rubio briefed PM Modi on the "sustained progress in bilateral cooperation across a wide range of sectors, including defence, strategic technologies, trade and investment, energy security, connectivity, education and people-to-people ties".

The US Secretary of State shared the US perspective on various regional and global issues, including the situation in West Asia, it said. PM Modi reaffirmed India's consistent support for peace efforts and reiterated the call for peaceful resolution of the conflicts through dialogue and diplomacy, it said.

The readout from the Prime Minister's Office said Modi requested Secretary Rubio to convey his warm greetings to President Trump and said that he looked forward to their continued exchanges.

Pigott said the Secretary of State shared his appreciation for India hosting the upcoming Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting and looked forward to advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific region alongside Australia, India, and Japan. US Ambassador Gor, who was also part of the Rubio-led delegation, described the meeting with PM Modi as "productive".

"We had a productive discussion on ways to deepen US-India cooperation across security, trade, and critical technologies - areas that strengthen both our nations and advance a free and open Indo-Pacific. India is a vital partner to the United States!" he said on 'X'. The Secretary of State inaugurated the Support Annex Building, which the US Mission said will deliver critical consular services. "We recognise that an orderly and secure consular system is vital to solidify this important relationship. That's why we're introducing a new America first visa scheduling tool that prioritises business professionals who strengthen these ties," Rubio said.

The US Secretary of State arrived in Kolkata this morning, visiting the Mother House -- the headquarters of Saint Teresa's Missionaries of Charity -- before flying to the national capital.

On Sunday, Rubio is scheduled for bilateral talks with Jaishankar. The Secretary of State will travel to Agra and Jaipur on Monday before returning to Delhi on Tuesday morning for the Quad foreign ministers meeting.

Rubio's trip to India comes over five weeks after Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri undertook a three-day visit to Washington DC that focused on stabilising the ties after a spell of uncertainty and strain.

The relations between the two countries witnessed a major downturn after Washington imposed punitive tariffs on India and President Donald Trump made controversial assertions regarding his role in de-escalating the India-Pakistan military clashes last May.

Over the next few months, the US president repeatedly and publicly claimed that he had resolved the military conflict between the two neighbours and saved millions of lives as it was heading toward a full-scale war.

New Delhi stoutly maintained that the cessation of the hostilities was the result of talks between India and Pakistan and the US involvement had nothing to do with it.

However, both sides made efforts in the last few months to repair the ties.

The two sides have resolved to finalise a mutually beneficial trade deal soon.

President Trump and PM Modi held a nearly 40-minute phone conversation on April 14. Following the call, Modi said he and Trump reviewed the "substantial progress" in the bilateral ties and that both sides are committed to further strengthening the India-US comprehensive global strategic partnership in "all areas". (PTI)

## Himanta calls on Sitharaman

follow its established organisational procedures in selecting the LoP. Gogoi, who himself lost from the Jorhat Assembly constituency, said the Congress party is currently reviewing and analysing its unexpected electoral performance to identify shortcomings and take corrective measures while strengthening its organisational structure.

The APCC president further said the party would play a constructive role as the Opposition, in accordance with the mandate given by the people of the state. He added that issues such as the rising prices of essential commodities would continue to be raised, noting that Congress legislators had already staged a walkout in the Assembly in protest over the matter.

# SEBI reviewing PMS framework; consultations on MF gifting, donations underway

**KOLKATA, May 23:** SEBI whole-time member Amarjeet Singh on Saturday said the regulator is undertaking a comprehensive review of the Portfolio Management Services (PMS) framework in consultation with industry body Association of Portfolio Managers in India (APMI) to 're-ignite growth' in the segment.

Addressing the Wealth and Capital Market Summit organised by the Indian Chamber of Commerce, Singh said SEBI would soon float a consultation paper on the proposed reforms.

"We are undertaking a comprehensive review of PMS and are engaged with APMI for consultations to re-ignite growth in this space. A consultation paper will be floated soon," Singh said.

He also said the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) is currently in the consultation stage on issues related to donation, gifting and third-party payments in mutual funds, as the regulator seeks to balance investor convenience with anti-money laundering safeguards.

SEBI's consultation paper issued on May 20 proposed a calibrated relaxation of the existing restrictions on third-party payments in mutual funds, which were originally framed under Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) norms.

Under the proposed framework, third-party payments may be permitted through 'clean and auditable routes' in select cases, including salary deductions by employers for systematic investments by employees and payment of distributor commissions in the form of mutual fund units instead of cash.

The proposed system would allow listed companies, EPFO-registered firms and asset management companies to deduct a fixed amount from an employee's salary for investment in mutual fund schemes chosen by the employee.

In another proposal, AMCs may be allowed to pay trail commissions to empanelled distributors through mutual fund units.

However, SEBI has proposed safeguards under which redemption proceeds and dividends would flow only into the verified bank account of the beneficiary investor or distributor, ensuring that no third-party cash exits are permitted. Public comments on the consultation paper have been invited till June 10. Singh said the regulator is also examining a framework to facilitate charitable donations through mutual funds.

Under the proposal, investors may be allowed to route part of their subscription amount, dividends or redemption proceeds directly to not-for-profit organisations or instruments listed on the Social Stock Exchange.

The consultation paper has proposed either dedicated schemes focused on social causes or embedded donation features within existing mutual fund schemes.

Asked about relentless foreign fund outflows from Indian equities, Singh said regulators are already working on simplification measures for overseas investors.

Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) have sold Indian equities worth more than ₹ 2.7 lakh crore between January and May 2026 so far, reflecting sustained pressure on domestic markets amid global uncertainty and shifting capital flows. (PTI)

# OPPO India expands Find X9 Series

**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, May 23:** OPPO India has launched its new flagship smartphones — the OPPO Find X9s and OPPO Find X9 Ultra — expanding its premium smartphone portfolio in India with a strong focus on advanced imaging, AI-powered experiences and flagship performance.

The smartphones will go on sale from May 28 through the OPPO e-Store, Flipkart, Amazon and retail outlets across the country.

The Find X9s will start at ₹79,999, while the Find X9 Ultra has been priced from ₹1,69,999. Applicable launch offers and cash-back schemes have also been announced.

According to IDC's Worldwide Quarterly Mobile Phone Tracker for Q1 2026, OPPO recorded a 22 per cent year-on-year growth, the highest among the top five smartphone brands, with its market share increasing to 15.3 per cent in India.

Commenting on the launch, Goldee Patnaik said the new devices reflected the evolving expectations of premium smartphone users in India.

The Find X9 Ultra introduces OPPO's next-generation Hasselblad Master Camera System featuring a 50MP 10x optical zoom telephoto camera, a 200MP main camera, a 200MP 3x telephoto camera and a 50MP ultra-wide camera.

# BSE, ICSI and AIBI organise SME Fund Raising Conclave in Guwahati

**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, May 23:** BSE, in collaboration with the Institute of Company Secretaries of India (ICSI) and the Association of Investment Bankers of India (AIBI), organised the SME Fund Raising Conclave in Guwahati with a focus on strengthening awareness among small and medium enterprises regarding capital market opportunities and ease of fundraising.

The conclave, initiated under the guidance of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), aimed to educate SMEs about leveraging capital markets for growth while addressing challenges, opportunities and regulatory requirements associated with fundraising and public listing.

Deep Mani Shah attended the programme as the Chief Guest and, in his keynote address, highlighted the evolving SME ecosystem in the country.

He reiterated SEBI's commitment towards facilitating credible capital formation through regulatory support and investor confidence.

The programme featured panel discussions and interactive sessions involving senior representatives from BSE, ICSI, AIBI and other stakeholders, who discussed various aspects of the SME IPO journey, including market readiness, regulatory compliance, due diligence and the role of intermediaries in ensuring transparent and credible

### UNDERGEAR CLEANING OF ICF & LHB COACHES

Tender Notice No.: DBWS-NIET-04-2026-27; dtd.: 21-05-2026. E-Tender are invited by the undersigned for the following work:  
**Name of the work:** Cleaning of coaches and undergear of both ICF and LHB Coaches at Dibrugarh for a period of 03 (three) years.  
**Approximate Cost of the work:** ₹87.23,052/- Inclusive of GST @18%. **Earnest Money:** ₹1,74,500/-  
**Date & time of Closing of tender:** 15:00 hrs. on 12-06-2026. The complete information with the tender document of above e-tender will be available up to 15:00 hrs. on 12-06-2026 in website [www.ireps.gov.in](http://www.ireps.gov.in)

CWM, Dibrugarh  
NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY  
Serving Customers With A Smile

### PROVISION OF MANPOWER FOR SWEEPING, CLEANING SWABBING & MAINTENANCE

Tender Notice No. SCL-Engg-36-2026. Works tenders through "E" Tendering system for and on behalf of the president of India are invited for the works as detailed below:- **Name of work:** Provision of manpower for sweeping, cleaning, swabbing & maintenance (House Keeping) at Badarpur Training Center & Sub-Ordinate Rest House for two years. **Tender Value:** ₹41,75,120/- **Earnest Money:** ₹83,500/- **Date & time of closing tender:** 15:00 hrs. of 15-06-2026 & opening at 15:00 hrs. of 16-06-2026. The complete information with tender documents of above e-tender will be available upto 15:00 hrs. of 15-06-2026 in the website [www.ireps.gov.in](http://www.ireps.gov.in)

DRM (W/Luding), Silchar  
NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY  
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Decision hailed as gesture to strengthen communal harmony and social peace

## Margherita Muslim community decides against cow sacrifice during Eid-ul-Azha



**HT Correspondent**  
**MARGHERITA, May 23:** In a significant gesture aimed at strengthening communal harmony and preserving the long-standing bond between communities, the Central

Margherita Muslim Committee has announced that no cow sacrifice will be performed in the Margherita area during this year's Eid-ul-Azha celebrations.

Eid-ul-Azha, also known as Qurbani Eid,

is scheduled to be observed on May 28.

The decision was formally announced during a press conference held on Saturday in Margherita, where members of the committee said the move was taken in the interest of maintaining peace, social harmony and law and order.

According to the committee, an important meeting was held on May 20 between the Margherita Co-District Administration, Assam Police officials and local Muslim leaders.

During the meeting, the Central Margherita Muslim Committee assured full cooperation with government policies and administrative directives related to the festival.

Committee leaders stated that Eid-ul-Azha symbolises sacrifice, devotion and purification of the heart, and emphasised that it was the responsibility of every citizen to ensure that celebrations do not hurt the sentiments of others or disturb the atmosphere of brotherhood in society.

"The social harmony and brotherhood that has existed among us for generations is paramount. Along with religious practices, fulfilling social responsibility is also part of our faith," the leaders said during the press conference.

The committee also appealed to all mosque management committees under the Margherita Co-District to strictly follow administrative guidelines and support the decision.

Among those present at the press conference were Maulana Rustam Ali, Uzair Alam Khan, Alfaz Ahmed, social worker Md. Toufik Khan and Moinur Haque Talukdar, along with members of mosque committees, local residents and youth representatives.

The decision has been widely appreciated by local residents and various organisations, many of whom described it as a responsible and far-sighted initiative that would further strengthen communal harmony and mutual respect in Assamese society.

## Goalpara administration intensifies awareness drive on HPV vaccination



**HT Correspondent**  
**GOALPARA, May 23:** The Goalpara district administration, under the supervision of District Commissioner Prodig Timung, has intensified efforts to popularise the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination programme aimed at girls in the 14-15 years age group.

The administration has been organising awareness meetings in different parts of the district to ensure successful implementation of the vaccination programme.

Officials stated that the administration is facing challenges due to misinformation being circulated by certain sections claiming that the vaccine has adverse side effects.

In response, the district administration has instructed the Health and Education Departments to conduct extensive awareness programmes to ensure that parents and students are not misled.

Meetings have also reportedly been held with representatives of private schools regarding the issue.

As part of the awareness campaign, a programme was organised on Saturday at Goalpara Jatiya Vidyalaya at Moilaputa, where girl students from nearby schools participated.

Addressing the gathering, DC Prodig Timung, who is also Chairman of the District Health Society, spoke about cancers associated with HPV infection and stressed the importance of vaccination for protection against such diseases.

He stated that the market price of the vaccine is around ₹9,000, but the government is providing it free of cost to girls aged between 14 and 15 years in the state. He urged parents and students to take advantage of the initiative to safeguard the health and future of young girls.

The awareness meeting was also attended by Jagadish Brahma, District Immunisation Officer Dr Joydeep Bhattacharya, District Programme Officer for Secondary Education Gun Hazarika and local social workers.

## Road mishap at Nagaon bypass

**HT Correspondent**  
**NAGAON, May 23:** A woman was killed while her husband sustained serious injuries in a tragic road accident that occurred on the Borghat Bypass in Nagaon on Saturday afternoon.

According to sources, the accident took place following a collision between a dumper and a two-wheeler bearing registration number AS 02 AR 5879.

The registration number of the dumper could not be immediately ascertained.

The deceased was identified as Kabita Ingtipi (32), a resident of Anjukpani Boipani village in Karbi Anglong.

She died on the spot following the collision.

Her husband, Mayaram Singma (35), sustained grievous injuries and was reportedly battling for his life at the time of filing this report.

The couple's six-month-old child also suffered minor injuries in the accident.

Personnel of Assam Police rushed to the spot soon after the incident and initiated an investigation into the accident. Further details are awaited.

## BJP MLA Dhiraj Goala visits bereaved families in Kokrajhar

Demand raised for fair investigation into mysterious death of two schoolgirls

**HT Correspondent**  
**KOKRAJHAR, May 23:** The mysterious death of two schoolgirls whose bodies were recovered from a pond near a tea garden at Dholmara in Kokrajhar has triggered widespread concern and outrage in the area.

According to police sources, the post-mortem report in the case is expected to be released next Monday.

On Saturday, Dhiraj Goala visited the homes of the bereaved families at Dholmara Lalkura as a representative of the Assam government.

The MLA met family members of the deceased students, identified as Anamika Bara and Sarita Lakra, expressed condolences and demanded strict punishment for those found responsible for the incident.

Goala also expressed hope that the investigation would be conducted in a fair and transparent manner.

He assured the families that the government would extend all necessary assistance and support



after the post-mortem report is made available.

An AASAA delegation led by Salim Minz was also present during the visit.

The bodies of the two schoolgirls were recovered on May 21 from a pond near a tea garden after they had reportedly left home for school earlier in the day.

The circumstances surrounding their deaths remain unclear.

Apart from Goala, several local leaders and representatives also visited the area on Saturday, including Derhasat Basumatary and Durga Hasda, who conveyed condolences to the grieving families and reviewed the situation.

The families of the deceased students once again appealed to the government and administration for a proper investigation and justice in the case.

## Sivasagar district task force to monitor prices of essential commodities

**HT Correspondent**  
**SIVASAGAR, May 23:** A meeting of the district-level task force constituted by the Sivasagar district administration was held at Sukapha Bhawan on recently to review the prevailing market situation amid rising prices of essential commodities.

The meeting was chaired by Gauripriya Deori, Additional District Commissioner in charge of the Food, Civil Supplies and Consumer Affairs Department.

Officials of the Food, Public Distribution and Consumer Affairs Department, Agriculture and Horticulture Department, Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Department, Fisheries Department, Circle Officers from various revenue circles, along with retailers and wholesalers of the district, attended the meeting.

Discussions were held on the responsibilities and duties of the district-level task force in monitoring market prices and ensuring that consumers are not harassed by traders or vendors.

The meeting directed vendors to prominently display price lists on signboards for 22 old and 18 newly added essential commodities.

ADC Gauripriya Deori warned that strict legal action would be initiated against any trader or vendor found violating the directives issued by the authorities.

## Sonitpur DC launches tourism, welfare and healthcare initiatives in Tezpur



**HT Correspondent**  
**TEZPUR, May 23:** In a major push to tourism, public welfare and healthcare infrastructure in Sonitpur district, District Commissioner Ananda Kumar Das on Saturday announced the introduction of a light-and-sound show at the historic Agnigarh in Tezpur.

The proposed show will depict the legendary romance of Usha and Aniruddha as well as the mythological "Hari-Hara Yuddha" associated with King Baan.

The announcement was made during a programme organised at Chitrallekha Udyan, where the District Commissioner also inaugurated three new adventure sports facilities — sky cycling, zipline and zorbing ball — for tourists and visitors.

Speaking at the event, DC Das said the initiatives were aimed at increasing tourist attraction to Chitrallekha Udyan and other heritage sites of Tezpur while also addressing important social welfare concerns.

As part of the welfare programme, the District

Commissioner handed over financial assistance of ₹50,000 to the family of Rukmini Talukdar, an economically disadvantaged woman undergoing treatment for a critical illness.

The assistance was received by her husband Keshab Talukdar.

Das also presented a cheque of ₹55,000 to Bhaskar Choudhury, a meritorious student from an economically weaker background who recently secured admission to a National Law University.

In another initiative, bicycles were distributed among seven students from financially disadvantaged families in the Dhekiajuli and Naduar Assembly constituencies to assist them in commuting to school.

The beneficiaries included Anjali Bhuyan, Sukarmani Munda, Tili Baskey, August Orang and Budai Choren from Raunathpur ME School, along with Maina Mochahari and Someshwar Mosahari from Chatai Garo MV School.

The programme was attended by Additional District Commissioners Kamal Baruah and Kuldeep Hazarika, Assistant Commissioners Arunav Borkatoky and Rajen Acharya, Tezpur Municipal Board Executive Officer Charan Thomas, environmental activist Suresh Sirohia, Joint Director of Health Services Dr Biman Sarma and businessman Madan Sing, among others.

The event was anchored by Pankaj Baruah and District Information and Public Relations Officer Anika Gogoi.

Later, the District Commissioner inaugurated a modern air-conditioned mortuary at Tezpur Kanaklata Civil Hospital in the presence of senior Health Department officials.

The facility has been established for preservation of bodies for post-mortem examinations.

## Kaliaboria Mancha felicitates litterateur Upendra Borkatoky in Nagaon

**HT Correspondent**  
**NAGAON, May 23:** The Nagaon-based Kaliaboria Mancha, a common platform of natives of Kaliabor residing in Nagaon town and adjoining areas, felicitated eminent litterateur, literary critic and journalist Upendra Borkatoky at his residence in Ratnapur, Nagaon, on Saturday.

The organisation honoured Borkatoky in recognition of his recent receipt of a special award from the Asam Sahitya Sabha President.

Accepting the felicitation, Borkatoky spoke about the literary and cultural heritage of Kaliabor and said the name "Kaliabor" itself

carries a unique significance.

"Holding on to this significance, we must keep Kaliabor's rich literature and culture alive," he said.

Emphasising the importance of preserving one's identity and heritage, the veteran litterateur said it was essential for individuals, especially the younger generation, to remain connected to their roots.

He stated that only through such connection could the younger generation truly understand their heritage, culture and traditions.

Borkatoky also recalled the contributions of several eminent personalities from Kaliabor to Assamese literature and society. The programme was attended by

Mancha adviser Dr Arupjioti Mahanta, president Kanak Hazarika, vice-presidents Krishnakanta Saikia and Padma Goswami, general secretary Bubul Bora, secretary Pallavjyoti Mahanta, treasurer Dilip Bora and publicity secretary Prasanna Sarma, along with several members and family members of Borkatoky.

The Mancha felicitated the litterateur with a phulam gamosa, seleng, jaapi and a citation, while wishing him good health and a long life.

On the occasion, Borkatoky also presented copies of his latest book, Sei Sakalok Kenekoi Paharo, to members of the Mancha.

## NTPC Bongaigaon hosts Ash Utilization Meet 2026

**HT Correspondent**  
**KOKRAJHAR, May 23:** NTPC Limited Bongaigaon at Salakati organised a two-day Ash Utilization Meet 2026 beginning May 21, with discussions centred on sustainable ash management and digital transformation initiatives across NTPC stations.

The programme was organised on the theme "Driving Sustainable Ash Utilization with Digital Transformation" and aimed at providing a collaborative platform for deliberations on digital integration, infrastructure strengthening and efficient ash management practices.

The meet was inaugurated by Ravindra Kumar, Director (Oper-

ations), who stressed the importance of treating ash as a valuable resource with significant revenue potential.

In his keynote address, Kumar highlighted the role of digital technologies in improving operational efficiency in ash management and urged NTPC stations to actively utilise the AsTraM portal for enhanced transparency in transportation tracking, billing and monitoring systems.

He also emphasised the need to optimise Rail-Cum-Road (RCR) transport systems for long-distance ash movement, expedite completion of DAES facilities and ensure strict safety standards at ash dykes.

## NFR organises Rozgar Mela

Over 51,000 appointment letters distributed nationwide under Centre's employment initiative



**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, May 23:** Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) successfully organised Rozgar Mela programmes at Guwahati, Dimapur and Siliguri on Friday as part of the Government of India's nationwide employment generation initiative.

The programmes were organised in line with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's commitment towards employment generation and youth empowerment.

More than 51,000 appointment letters were distributed to newly selected candidates across the country during the nationwide event.

The Prime Minister participated in the Rozgar Mela through video conferencing at 11 am and addressed newly appointed candidates.

In his address, Modi urged the youth to dedicate themselves to nation-building and public service while highlighting the government's emphasis on transparent, merit-based and technology-driven recruitment systems.

This phase of the Rozgar Mela was conducted simultaneously at 47 locations across India, including three venues under the jurisdiction of NFR.

Around 400 participants attended physically at each venue, including nearly 200 newly re-

cruited candidates.

Appointment letters were formally distributed by dignitaries present at the respective events.

The Guwahati programme was held at Rang Bhawan Auditorium at the NF Railway Headquarters in Maligaon in the presence of Sarbananda Sonowal and Bijuli Kalita Medhi.

Senior railway officials led by Veer Bhadra Vishwakarma were also present.

The dignitaries handed over appointment letters to newly recruited candidates and congratulated them on joining government service.

At Dimapur, the programme was organised at the Town Hall in the presence of Pabitra Margherita along with senior officials and invited dignitaries.

The Siliguri programme took place at the Officers' Club in Kashmir Colony, New Jalpaiguri, in the presence of Kamlesh Paswan and Jayanta Kumar Roy, besides local MLAs and officials.

The appointments covered various ministries and departments of the Government of India, including the Ministry of Railways, Ministry of Home Affairs, Department of Posts, Department of Financial Services and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, among others.

NFR stated that the Rozgar Mela initiative continues to serve as an important platform for connecting youth with employment opportunities in public service and reaffirmed its commitment towards supporting national development and youth empowerment initiatives.

# Archaeological significance of Bamuni Hills of Tezpur

*The artistic beauty of the stone-carved sculptures of Bamuni Hills is incomparable and captivating. Among these sculptures, the images of Vishnu's Dashavatara, Nataraja, Durga, Ganesh, the scene of Narasimha slaying Hiranyakashipu, celestial nymphs and Gajavyala Brahma are especially noteworthy. The delicate craftsmanship, intricate designs and flawless skill of these images reveal the extraordinary ability and artistic genius of ancient sculptors. The dynamism of the Nataraja sculpture appears so lifelike that one feels as though Shiva's cosmic dance has been captured within stone itself. The floral motifs and intricate carvings associated with this sculpture further enhance its artistic beauty. Among the Dashavatara sculptures of Vishnu, the carvings associated with Narasimha, Parashurama, Balarama and Rama vividly express mythological narratives.*



By: Himaneshu Ranjan Bhuyan

Situated in the south-eastern part of Tezpur, near the banks of the Brahmaputra, Bamuni Hills still stands today as a living testimony to the ancient civilization of Assam. The stone-carved sculptures of this hill narrate the story of an extraordinary synthesis between Aryan and non-Aryan cultures, revealing a profound picture of the artistic, religious and social life of ancient Assam. These artworks are not only enriched with artistic beauty, but also serve as clear evidence of the diversity and prosperity of ancient Kamarupa civilization. However, with the passage of time, natural calamities, historical invasions and modern neglect have reduced this historic site to ruins. The absence of effective conservation measures under the supervision of the Archaeological Survey of India, along with the lack of awareness among local people and governmental indifference, has opened the path toward the disappearance of this invaluable heritage.

The historical significance of Bamuni Hills is immensely profound. The myths associated with the origin of the name of this place indicate its cultural and religious importance. According to folklore, this hill is connected with the Vamana incarnation of Vishnu, who deceived the generous King Bali and occupied heaven and earth in exchange for three steps of land. This legend reveals an important aspect of the religious beliefs of ancient Kamarupa, where the worship of Vishnu occupied a central role. Another popular belief states that this hill was the residence of Usha, the daughter of King Bana, and that she used to visit the nearby Bhairavi Temple daily for worship. Although the historical basis of these legends has not been definitively established, they provide evidence of the cultural significance of Bamuni Hills and its deep influence on public consciousness. Historians and archaeologists believe that the stone-carved sculptures of this site belong to the ninth or tenth century CE, when the rulers of the Salastambha dynasty governed Kamarupa. This period represented a prosperous age of ancient Kamarupa, during which remarkable progress was achieved in the fields of art, architecture and religion. During his visit in 1924, archaeologist Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay mentioned the remains of seven temples at this site, with four temples situated at the four corners, two in the central area and one on the eastern side. His observations that Vishnu, Shiva and other deities were worshipped in these temples reveal the religious diversity of this place. An extraordinary synthesis between the characteristics of ancient Indian architecture and local styles can be observed in these architectural structures, reflecting the diverse character of Kamarupa civilization. Through this historical background, the significance of Bamuni Hills and the depth of the cultural heritage associated with it become distinctly evident. The rectangular walls surrounding the temples and the intricate architectural designs demonstrate the architectural expertise and artistic vision of the society of that time. This historical importance establishes Bamuni Hills as a priceless monument of ancient Kamarupa civilization, introducing an important chapter of our heritage.

The artistic beauty of the stone-carved sculptures of Bamuni Hills is incomparable and captivating. Among these sculptures, the images of Vishnu's Dashavatara, Nataraja, Durga, Ganesh, the scene of Narasimha slaying Hiranyakashipu, celestial nymphs and Gajavyala Brahma are especially noteworthy. The delicate craftsmanship, intricate designs and flawless skill of these images reveal the extraordinary ability and artistic genius of ancient sculptors. The dynamism of the Nataraja sculpture appears so lifelike that one feels as though Shiva's cosmic dance has been captured within stone itself. The floral motifs and intricate carvings associated with this sculpture further enhance its artistic beauty. Among the Dashavatara sculptures of Vishnu, the carvings asso-

ciated with Narasimha, Parashurama, Balarama and Rama vividly express mythological narratives. Decorative creeper motifs adorn both sides of these sculptures, reflecting the refined artistic sensibilities of ancient sculptors. The style of these sculptures bears resemblance to ancient sculptures found in other regions of India, such as those in Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar. This similarity indicates the existence of cultural exchange and communication between the artists of Kamarupa and the outside world. These artworks reveal not only artistic beauty, but also a deep portrayal of the religious and social life of ancient Kamarupa. The synthesis of



Aryan and non-Aryan cultures is clearly visible in these sculptures, where the co-existence of the worship of Vishnu and Shiva reflects the religious diversity of this place. For example, the sculpture depicting Narasimha slaying Hiranyakashipu vividly captures the dynamism and dramatic intensity associated with the mythological tale. The intricate designs and delicate carvings of these artworks demonstrate the profound artistic knowledge and technical expertise of the sculptors of that era. The artistic beauty of these sculptures presents a clear picture of the artistic prosperity of ancient Kamarupa civilization, establishing Bamuni Hills as an important centre of ancient Indian art. Through these artworks, various aspects of religious belief, mythology and social life have been expressed, clearly revealing the multidimensional character of ancient Kamarupa civilization. This artistic brilliance further deepens the historical value of Bamuni Hills, identifying it as an invaluable heritage.

The present condition of Bamuni Hills is extremely pathetic and alarming. No effective conservation measures have been undertaken for this site under the supervision of the Archaeological Survey of India, as a result of which the process of deterioration of these artworks has gradually intensified. Natural causes such as the impact of rainwater, the growth of moss and the gradual erosion of time have continuously worsened the condition of these sculptures. Certain portions of some sculptures have broken away, such as the fractured upper stone section of the Nataraja sculpture, while the head portion of the Narasimha sculpture has become detached. Some artworks have been covered with moss, damaging both their artistic beauty and historical value. Besides natural decay, human negligence has become another major factor behind the destruction of this site. Many valuable artworks have been stolen or lost, such as the extraordinary three-sided sculpture known as "Bei," which featured carvings of eight-petalled lotus flowers. The beauty and historical importance of this "Bei" were described in Rajmohan Nath's Gourabamoy Asom,

Kanaklal Barua's Early History of Kamarupa and Birinchi Kumar Barua's Assamese Culture. However, this artwork is no longer present at Bamuni Hills, and no investigation or initiative has been undertaken to trace its disappearance. Some of these missing artworks have reportedly been found in different places in Tezpur, such as Chitralakha Udyan or private collections, reflecting a tragic picture of the lack of security at this site. As a result of this neglect, the artworks of Bamuni Hills are gradually vanishing, raising fears that an important chapter of ancient Kamarupa civilization may disappear forever. The irresponsibility of the Archaeological Department and the lack of awareness among local society have diminished the historical value of this place. Urgent measures are required to halt the process of deterioration of these artworks, and the absence of such efforts has made the historical significance of this site even more vulnerable. Consequently, not only has physical damage been inflicted upon the artworks of Bamuni Hills, but the cultural and historical values associated with them have also suffered, raising important questions re-

garding the preservation of our heritage. Among the causes behind the destruction of Bamuni Hills, natural disasters and historical invasions played highly significant roles. Historical records indicate that the temples of this site were largely destroyed by earthquakes that occurred in ancient Kamarupa. In particular, a powerful earthquake caused severe damage to the architectural structures and artworks of this place. The effects of this earthquake left permanent marks upon the foundations of the temples and the structural integrity of the sculptures. Besides these natural calamities, medieval invasions also emerged as major reasons behind the destruction of this site. Historians believe that during the invasion led by Kalapahar, the commander of Sultan Sulaiman Karrani of Bengal, between 1550 and 1565 CE, many historical monuments of Assam were destroyed. After demolishing important religious sites such as the Kamakhya Temple and the Hayagriva Madhava Temple at Hajo, Kalapahar advanced toward Tezpur, resulting in widespread destruction of the temples of Bamuni Hills. These invasions caused not only the physical destruction

of artworks but also serious damage to the cultural and religious significance of the site. As a result of these historical incidents, a major portion of the artworks of Bamuni Hills was destroyed, the impact of which still remains visible in the ruins of the site. Through an analysis of these causes of destruction, the historical significance of Bamuni Hills and the consequences of neglect toward its preservation become distinctly evident. The influence of these historical events has left permanent scars upon the artworks of this site, emphasizing the urgent necessity for the preservation of this heritage. These causes of destruction present a tragic picture of the loss of an important chapter of ancient Kamarupa civilization, raising serious questions regarding the preservation of our heritage.

The cultural synthesis associated with the artworks of Bamuni Hills represents a unique characteristic of ancient Kamarupa civilization. The coexistence of the worship of Vishnu and Shiva within the temples of this site reflects a beautiful fusion of the religious beliefs of Aryan and non-Aryan communities. According to archaeologist B. P. Singh, the artworks

of this site establish the existence of a Vishnu temple, where the sculptures of the Dashavatara signify the importance of Vishnu worship. On the other hand, the sculptures of Nataraja, Durga and Ganesh indicate the prevalence of the worship of Shiva and Shakti, which was generally associated with non-Aryan communities. This religious synthesis reveals the diverse character of ancient Kamarupa civilization, where the beliefs and traditions of different communities merged harmoniously. The style and craftsmanship of these artworks portray not only the religious diversity of Kamarupa civilization but also its artistic richness. The intricate designs and carvings associated with mythological figures within these sculptures demonstrate the profound artistic knowledge and expertise of ancient sculptors. Similarities can also be observed between these artworks and artistic traditions from other parts of India, indicating cultural exchange between the artists of Kamarupa and the outside world. The dynamism and decorative style of the Nataraja sculpture resemble the art of the Chola period of South India. This cultural synthesis re-



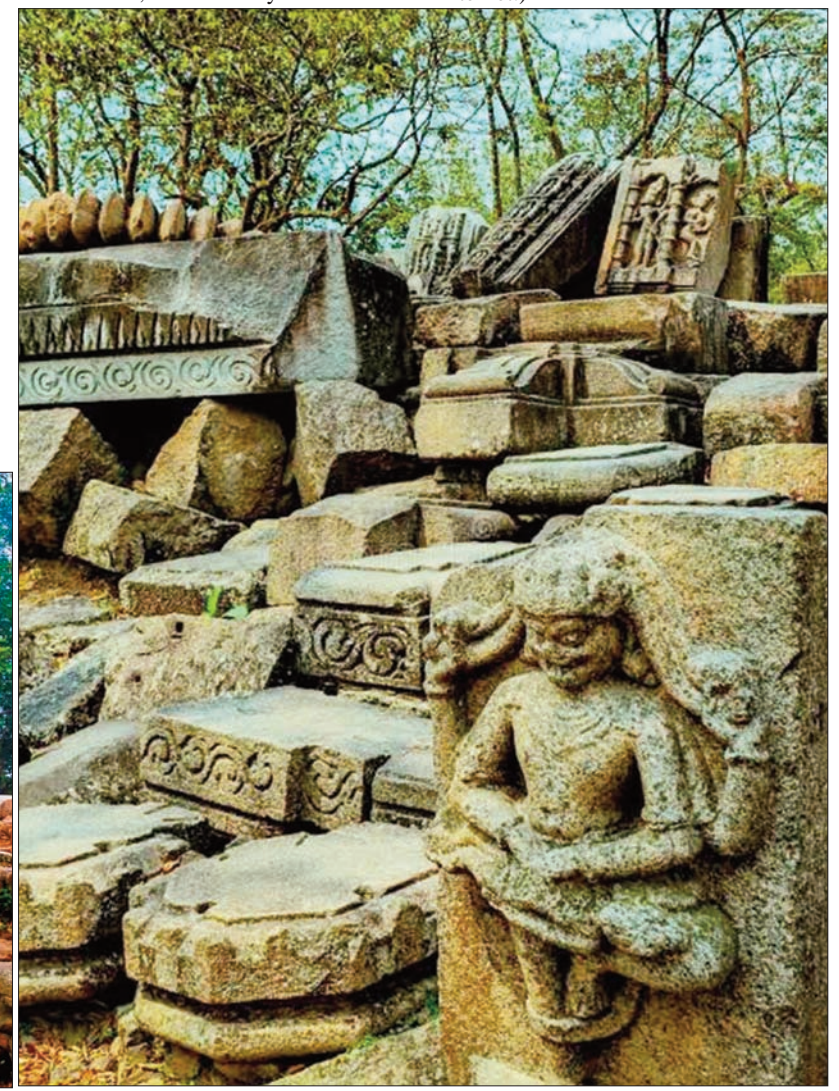
veals the prosperous and diverse character of ancient Kamarupa civilization, further deepening the historical significance of Bamuni Hills. Through these artworks, different dimensions of religious belief, mythology and social life have been expressed, clearly revealing the multidimensional character of ancient Kamarupa civilization. Through this cultural synthesis, the artworks of Bamuni Hills introduce an important chapter of ancient Kamarupa civilization, establishing the site as an invaluable heritage.

The tourism potential of Bamuni Hills is extensive and multidimensional. The natural beauty of this hill situated beside the Brahmaputra, combined with the artistic value of its stone-carved sculptures, offers the possibility of developing it into a popular tourist destination. The historical and cultural significance of this place could become a special attraction for visitors, particularly for those interested in history, art and culture. The natural beauty surrounding the hill, the abundance of greenery and the proximity of the Brahmaputra create a peaceful and picturesque environment capable of captivating tourists. However, governmental indifference and the lack of preservation have left this site behind in the field of tourism. At present, there is no proper security arrangement at this location, causing it to become a shelter for antisocial elements. This situation has hindered the tourism potential of Bamuni Hills and diminished its historical and cultural value. To enhance its tourism potential, importance must be given to preservation along with the development of proper infrastructure. For example, arrangements such as security systems for tourists, improvement of roads, establishment of information centres and construction of rest facilities could increase the attractiveness of this site. Initiatives to raise public awareness regarding the historical significance of this place and involve the local community in preservation efforts would also strengthen its tourism prospects. Through such measures, the historical and cultural importance of Bamuni Hills would be promoted among tourists, helping establish it as a major tourist destination. Through tourism development, awareness regarding the importance of this heritage would spread among the public, drawing greater attention toward its preservation. In this way, the historical and cultural value of Bamuni Hills could be preserved for future generations, ensuring the long-term protection of its heritage.

Urgent measures are necessary for the preservation of Bamuni Hills. Scientific methods should be applied to reduce the rate of deterioration of these artworks by minimizing the effects of natural causes. For example, the application of waterproof protective layers, environmental control measures to prevent moss growth and regular monitoring could help prevent the deterioration of these sculptures. Furthermore, strict security measures are

required to prevent the theft of artworks, including the appointment of security personnel, installation of surveillance cameras and cooperation with local communities. By instilling a sense of pride among local people regarding the heritage of this site, they can be actively involved in preservation efforts. For instance, educational programmes about the historical importance of this site could be introduced among school and college students, training facilities for local people regarding heritage conservation could be arranged and cultural programmes associated with this site could be organized to increase public awareness. An effective preservation plan should be formulated through coordination among archaeologists, historians, local communities and government institutions. Through such initiatives, the historical glory of Bamuni Hills can be restored, preserving a priceless chapter of ancient Kamarupa civilization for future generations. These preservation efforts would safeguard the artistic and historical value of the sculptures of Bamuni Hills, ensuring the long-term protection of this heritage. Through these efforts, the historical and cultural significance of Bamuni Hills would remain preserved for future generations, establishing this site as an invaluable heritage.

The ruins of Bamuni Hills are a priceless monument of ancient Assamese civilization. The stone-carved sculptures of this place reveal not only artistic beauty but also profound historical significance. The synthesis of Aryan and non-Aryan cultures reflected in these sculptures illuminates the diverse character of ancient Kamarupa civilization. The artistic brilliance and cultural importance of these artworks introduce an important chapter of ancient Kamarupa civilization. However, governmental indifference, lack of preservation and inadequate public awareness have pushed this site toward destruction. Natural disasters and historical invasions have already damaged a major portion of these artworks, while present-day neglect has further intensified the extent of destruction. To enhance the tourism potential of this place, emphasis must be placed on preservation alongside the development of suitable infrastructure. Through coordinated efforts among the local society of Tezpur, government institutions and archaeologists, the historical glory of Bamuni Hills can be restored. Preserving this site is a responsibility toward safeguarding an important part of our heritage for future generations. Through such preservation efforts, the artistic and historical value of the sculptures of Bamuni Hills will remain protected, preserving this site as a priceless monument of ancient Assam and Kamarupa civilization for the generations to come. (References - Assistance has been taken from several books, memorial volumes, multiple published articles and various writings available on the internet.)



# The Silent Exit: Navigating the Trauma of friendship breakups

By: Dipak Kurmi

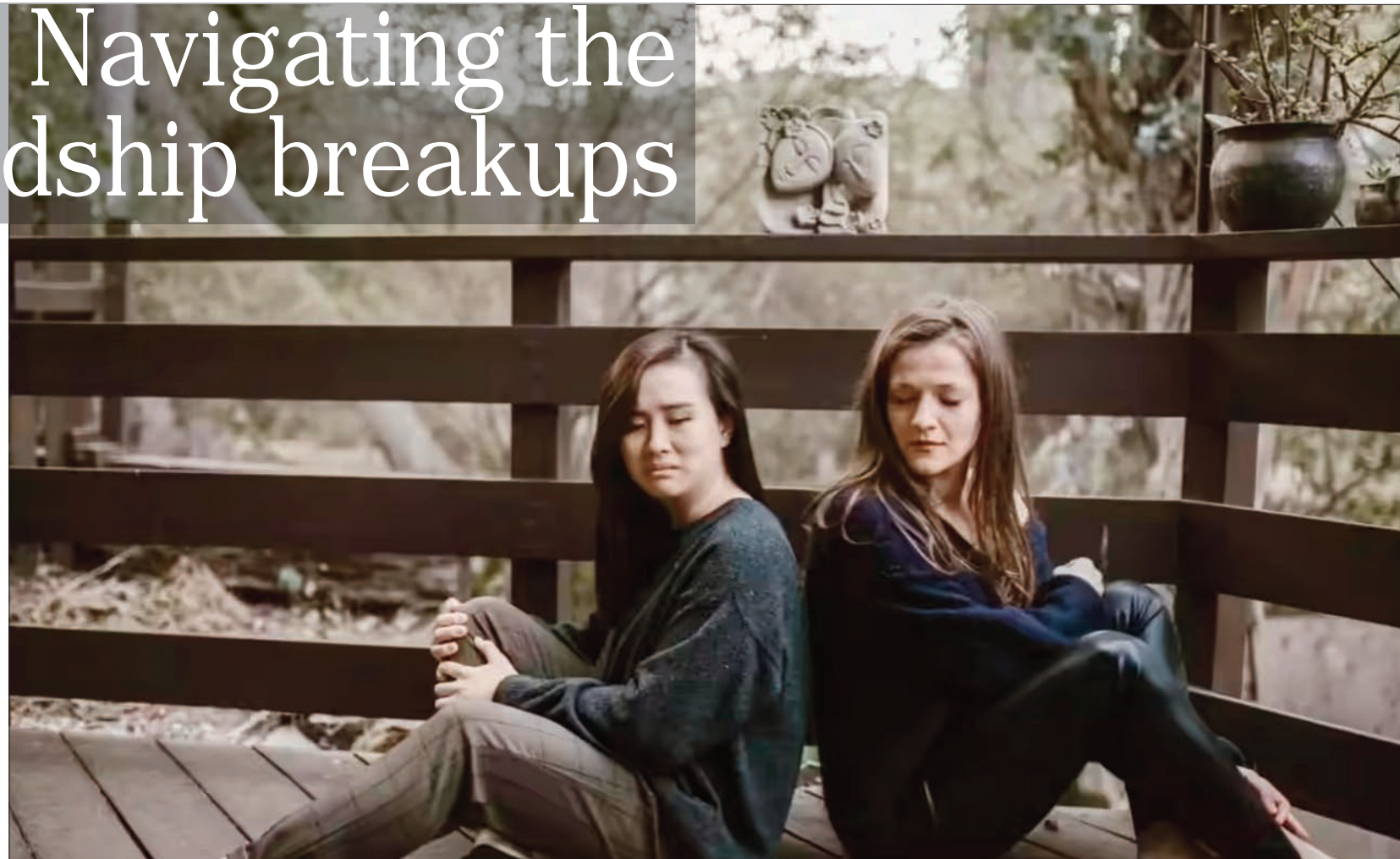
The phenomenon of friendship dissolution, particularly when executed through sudden and absolute digital ostracism, represents one of the most enigmatic and psychologically distressing events in adult interpersonal dynamics. In the contemporary digital age, the act of abruptly blocking a companion across the entire spectrum of social utilities—including Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and even professional networking platforms like LinkedIn—leaves an individual trapped in a state of profound ambiguity. This overnight cessation of contact occurs without explicit justification, forcing the discarded party into an ongoing cycle of retrospective analysis. Individuals frequently find themselves perpetually interrogating their past behaviors, micro-analyzing final interactions, and re-examining moments that outwardly appeared entirely harmonious, such as casual conversations over drinks or celebrations immediately following university graduation. The transition from active, reciprocal camaraderie to absolute, unmediated silence creates a jarring relational fracture, effectively obliterating years of shared history without offering the closure typically associated with formal relational endings.

Sociological and psychological research indicates that the trauma induced by the sudden termination of a platonic friendship often eclipses the distress caused by conventional life stressors, such as professional setbacks, acute health crises, or the experience of romantic unrequitedness. Even when contrasted with the dissolution of romantic partnerships, where the termination may not be mutually desired, the abrupt end of a friendship frequently inflicts a deeper, more enduring psychological wound. In romantic contexts, individuals often maintain a degree of pragmatic detach-

ment, viewing the separation as a systemic mismatch and trusting that a more compatible partner will eventually emerge. Consequently, romantic endings rarely prompt the same obsessive self-doubt or meticulous parsing of past actions. The unique devastation of a friendship breakup stems from the fact that platonic bonds are inherently built on voluntary affinity, shared values, and mutual choice, making an unexplained ejection from a friend's life feel like a fundamental rejection of one's core identity.

The enduring preoccupation with an unexplained friendship breakup is driven by several distinct psychological variables, chief among which is the permanent denial of truth and closure. When a relationship is severed unilaterally and without explanation, the left-behind individual is denied the narrative clarity required to process grief, transforming the act into a form of interpersonal cruelty. This lack of information often births a persistent anxiety that one may have committed an egregious, offensive social transgression entirely without realization, fostering a deep-seated fear of uncovering a fundamental personal flaw. Furthermore, the grief is compounded by a genuine, profound sense of loss regarding the unique attributes of the departed companion. The absence of their distinct humor, intellectual advice, curated musical recommendations, literary insights, consistent companionship, and deliberate attentiveness leaves a specific void in the individual's daily existence that cannot be easily replicated by subsequent social connections.

With the passage of years, the acute trauma of digital ostracism can eventually morph into a perspective tempered by humor and objective detachment, particularly when evaluating the absurdity of being blocked on strictly professional platforms like LinkedIn. Nevertheless,



the initial experience often serves as a harsh baptism into the realities of adult social dynamics, demonstrating that the dissolution of friendships is an inevitable facet of human development. While some relationships conclude with a sudden, disruptive severance, others undergo a slow, agonizingly gradual depreciation characterized by increasingly infrequent communication until all meaningful interaction ceases entirely. In these instances, the relationship is reduced to a passive viewership, where one's only insight into the former friend's life is mediated through the sterile lens of social media broadcasts. This evolutionary thinking of social circles forces individuals to confront the reality that human con-

nections are fluid and often time-bound.

This forced adaptation to the loss of established connections ultimately catalyzes personal evolution, compelling individuals to re-evaluate their identity and social desires as they navigate new professional environments and mature over time. This ongoing refinement of one's social circle introduces a critical, discerning litmus test for long-term, established friendships that appear to be faltering or teetering on the edge of permanent separation. The defining question matures into a strategic assessment of reliability: if an individual were to experience a profound crisis and genuinely require support, would the friend in question actually show up? When the objec-

tive answer to this inquiry is negative, it indicates that the friendship has lost its reciprocal utility and is no longer worth fighting to preserve. Recognizing this boundary allows individuals to conserve their emotional energy and invest it in connections that offer genuine stability and mutual support.

Adopting a logical framework toward the conclusion of a friendship—similar to the rationalizations applied to failed romantic endeavors—enables individuals to conceptualize these losses as necessary chapters in personal growth. Embracing the philosophy that certain relationships possess a natural expiration date allows one to believe that appropriate companions will present themselves at the cor-

rect existential moments. This analytical approach thickens the emotional skin, framing the departure of friends not as an absolute tragedy, but as a constructive mechanism that clarifies personal identity and refines future relational standards. Yet, the acquisition of intellectual fortitude and philosophical perspective does not nullify the underlying emotional pain. The intellectual understanding that a friendship's end may be for the best fails to completely erase the lingering sting of betrayal, reminding us that while logic can govern our future actions, it cannot entirely insulate the human psyche from the deep hurt of a lost connection. (the writer can be reached at [dipakkurmigpltd@gmail.com](mailto:dipakkurmigpltd@gmail.com))

## The Colourful Neighbourhood

By: Meenakshi Gogoi

Varsha moved into her new residence, the Alpine Apartments in North Delhi. She was fascinated by the apartment's grey-bluish buildings, lush green park, and a lively children's park. Her busy academic life had prevented her from socialising with her neighbours, except for the Guptas, next door. Life was moving at its own pace while Varsha was teaching, following the mundane routine of going to and returning from her college to apartment.

On a Sunday morning, the President of her apartment colony, Satish, rang her doorbell. Varsha lazily got up from the sofa, holding her cup of masala tea, and opened the door. Satish greeted her and introduced himself. He asked, "You Mr Samarth's new tenant. Right?"

"Yes. Mr Samarth is living with his family in Bangalore. He rented me his flat," replied a soft-spoken Varsha. Satish said, "Alright. I have come to invite you to the Holi celebration. Please, join us in the park." Not knowing what to say, she reluctantly thanked him for inviting her. But she would not play Holi. "Would you like to contribute money for the celebration?" asked Satish, politely. "Surely," replied Varsha, and she hurriedly paid Rs. 500. He marked her name in the list of contributors and took her leave.

Varsha had no fond memories of playing Holi with friends during her college and University days. She used to skip the festival due to fear of being touched by people under the pretext of applying colours to her body.

In the evening, her neighbour, Neelam Gupta, offered her home-made Gujjias and dry fruits. It was a kind gesture on her part to distribute sweets among friends and neighbours during festivals. She invited Varsha to dinner at her home on Holi night. Varsha appreciated Neelam's good sense of building friendly bonds with old and new neighbours. Varsha served her an aromatic cup of cardamom tea with snacks. They began talking about their lives and daily routines. Varsha felt an instant connection with Neelam, as their conversation flowed like that of close friends. Soon after, Neelam left to distribute sweets to a few other families residing in the colony.

The next day, Varsha arrived from college and spotted bamboo poles set up on the park. The apartment's Union was busy supervising minimal decoration where needed for the Holi festival. She spotted Mr Anil Gupta, Neelam's husband, colony's Secretary, handing tea cups to the working men and staff for refreshment. It was evening by the time the ground was appropriately set for Holi.

Varsha woke up mid-morning on the day of Holi. She stood on her balcony, sipping her morning tea, and was delighted to see children chasing each other as they applied colours, a usual, funny sight during Holi. Some of them were drenched in colours, enjoying their wet bodies. She spotted Neelam's daughter dancing to Bollywood Holi tunes energetically with her friends. Varsha attended a few calls from family and friends wishing her a happy Holi. Seeing an old couple holding hands with bright smiles on their faces, she felt, perhaps, their Holi memories were brought alive. To find tranquillity in such joyful moments was what Varsha sought after her hectic days of writing papers for her academic conferences, which were more time-consuming than anything else in her life.

Soon, the doorbell rang. It was Neelam at the door. With a friendly demeanour, Neelam asked Varsha to come along for the Holi cele-



bration. Varsha tried to politely dissuade Neelam from going out, but Neelam persuaded her. Varsha was afraid of being lost among the coloured faces and wet bodies. But after some time, she was on the ground with Neelam.

Satish and his wife, and Anil, along with a few women called by Neelam, wished Varsha a happy Holi. Neelam brought a decorated thali with multi-coloured scoops of dry gular, placed perfectly in little tomb shapes. She put a red colour dot on Varsha's forehead, and softly applied dry gular on her cheeks. Varsha reciprocated and felt at ease, overcoming her nervousness.

Neelam introduced Varsha to some other women and older couples. They all sat in a circle, facing one another, enjoying tea, sweets, and snacks as they were served on the table.

Amidst the dancing crowd, although no one touched her to apply colours forcibly, Varsha did feel the freezing moment she once experienced during high school when a coloured face and a wet body touched her. Somebody rubbed dry gular on her cheeks from her back without her consent. It was a nerve-wracking moment for her. She remembered biting the person's hand and sprinting from the spot. A little farther away, when she looked back hesitantly, Varsha could not identify the person, as there were many coloured faces and bodies around.

On the ground, Varsha noticed that the young girls were playing without losing their sense of self-protection. She spotted a teenage girl who stopped a young man from forcibly applying colour to her. It was much appreciated. By noon, the high-spirited Holi crowd was dispersed. In a joyous mood, Neelam reminded Varsha to join her family at dinner. Varsha smiled and nodded. After a warm bath, she fell asleep and woke to a heavy downpour with a breezy evening. She made a cup of ginger tea and sat in her living room. The roaring wind was patting the long palm leaves potted on her balcony. She stood near the balcony and watched the raindrops fall everywhere, touching and transforming everything into a dust-free, luscious green. Soon, her wandering eyes fell on the wall clock. It was 8 p.m., and she went to Neelam's place for dinner.

Neelam's daughter, Pooja, received her at the door. She made Varsha sit comfortably in the drawing room, where one of her neighbours' family was already there. Neelam greeted her with a platter of sweets and snacks, placing it on the centre table for the guests to munch on.

Soon, Neelam's spouse, Anil, came out of the kitchen, where he had been helping his

wife prepare dinner. He brought his cooked dahi-baingan in a casserole. The food was served, and the guests took their seats at the table. Neelam said, "Anil ji is a good home cook who only cooks his speciality dahi-baingan. We are so used to his dish at festivals," and she laughed. The guests laughed as well. Anil was not surprised by what Neelam said, as he had been used to hearing the same before while treating guests. Anil smiled, raised a glass of cold drink, and said, "Dear friends, I will introduce you to my new special dish soon. Till then, I hope you all enjoy my dahi-baingan." Everybody responded to Anil by raising their glasses of cold drinks. It was a fun-filled dinner night for Varsha.

Neelam brought kheer for the guests after dinner. She spotted Varsha on their balcony. Neelam went near her and said, "You are here staring at the sky." Varsha turned back, smiled and said, "I like to see the sky after rain and to smell the fresh earthy air. It is so peaceful." Neelam nodded. She handed Varsha a small bowl of kheer. Pooja handed Neelam her bowl of kheer, and left. Every bite of the kheer made Varsha reminisce about her mother's homemade kheer. Her taste buds were sweetened. They talked about food and how their mothers often cooked their favourite meals at home.

Neelam's mother was keen for her to learn cooking to satisfy her family and friends after marriage. On Sundays, Neelam would prepare one dish as her mother had taught her and feed her family. She said, "My mother sprouted the seed of cooking in me so well that I ended up loving the smell of dry aromatic spices and cooking new dishes out of my culinary skills." However, Varsha had a completely different experience altogether. She had skipped cooking meals and would occasionally cook food items when needed. Her mother did not favour her learning cooking on the pretext of marriage. She would instead ask Varsha to focus solely on her studies and build a successful career. Varsha realised that Neelam was happy cooking for her family.

Soon, the wind began to blow, as rainfall was expected, and they came inside the living room. The guests had gone, and Varsha left Neelam's place with a content heart. In her diary, Varsha wrote about her happy time spent with neighbours on Holi. The humblest treatment she received without interacting with many of them before. She was delighted to find a homely atmosphere away from home. She stopped by writing, "I am overwhelmed and pleased to be connected with affectionate people around me." Varsha peacefully fell asleep in the embrace of that rainy night.

## Voices across Borders

By: Mowsam Hazarika

In an increasingly interconnected world, the boundaries of national discourse are no longer confined within geography. Questions raised in one corner of the globe can resonate across continents, especially when they concern universal democratic values such as freedom of the press and human rights. A recent instance involving a journalist from Norway raising concerns before Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has once again brought these issues into sharp focus. The episode is not merely a diplomatic moment; it is emblematic of a larger global conversation about the state of democratic freedoms in contemporary societies.

**The Context of the Exchange:** India, often celebrated as the world's largest democracy, has long prided itself on a vibrant press and a constitution that guarantees fundamental rights. However, in recent years, concerns have been raised by international observers, media watchdogs, and civil society organizations about the shrinking space for dissent and independent journalism in the country. It is within this backdrop that the Norwegian journalist's questions gain significance.

**Press Freedom Under Scrutiny:**

Freedom of the press is often regarded as the cornerstone of any functioning democracy. It ensures that power is held accountable, citizens remain informed, and diverse viewpoints can coexist. In India, the media landscape is vast and dynamic, encompassing thousands of newspapers, television channels, and digital platforms. Yet, this plurality does not automatically translate into freedom.

Critics argue that there has been an increasing trend of pressure on journalists through legal mechanisms, economic constraints, and, in some cases, intimidation. Laws related to sedition, defamation, and national security have occasionally been invoked against journalists and activists. Additionally, the concentration of media ownership and the influence of corporate interests have raised questions about editorial independence.

The Norwegian journalist's query thus reflects a broader international concern: whether the institutional safeguards for press freedom in India are being eroded. It also underscores the importance of transparency and accountability in addressing such perceptions.

**Human Rights Concerns:** Closely linked to press freedom is the larger framework of human rights. A free press often serves as the first line of defense against human rights violations, bringing issues to public attention and prompting corrective action. When journalists face restrictions, the ability to report on human rights issues is inevitably compromised.

In India, debates around human rights have intensified in recent years, particularly in relation to issues such as freedom of expression, minority rights, and the treatment of dissenters. International organizations have occasionally highlighted concerns regarding the use of stringent laws, internet shutdowns, and the detention of activists.

The Norwegian journalist's intervention can be seen

as part of a global effort to hold governments accountable to international human rights standards. While such questions may sometimes be perceived as intrusive, they are also indicative of the shared responsibility that nations bear in upholding universal values.

**Diplomatic Sensitivities and Sovereignty:** It is important to acknowledge that questions on internal matters can be sensitive in diplomatic contexts. Governments often emphasize the principle of sovereignty and non-interference, arguing that domestic issues should be addressed within national frameworks. From this perspective, external criticism may be viewed as an overreach.

India has consistently maintained that its democratic institutions are robust and capable of addressing challenges internally. Government representatives have often highlighted the country's independent judiciary, active civil society, and electoral processes as evidence of its democratic resilience.

However, in a globalized era, the line between domestic and international concerns is increasingly blurred. Nations engage with each other not only through trade and diplomacy but also through shared commitments to human rights and democratic norms. As such, questions raised by foreign journalists, while sensitive, are part of an evolving global dialogue.

**The Role of International Media:**

The involvement of a Norwegian journalist also highlights the role of international media in shaping perceptions. Journalists operating beyond national boundaries often bring an external perspective, which can both enrich and complicate the discourse. On one hand, they can highlight issues that may not receive adequate attention domestically. On the other, their interventions may sometimes lack the nuanced understanding of local contexts.

Nevertheless, the presence of international scrutiny can act as a catalyst for introspection. Democracies, by their very nature, thrive on debate and self-correction. Engaging constructively with criticism, rather than dismissing it outright, can strengthen institutional credibility.

**The Way Forward:** The episode serves as a reminder that freedom of the press and human rights are not static achievements but ongoing commitments. For India, this means reaffirming its constitutional values and ensuring that its institutions remain independent and transparent. Measures to protect journalists, promote media plurality, and safeguard freedom of expression are essential in this regard.

At the same time, it is important for international actors to approach such issues with sensitivity and respect for national contexts. Constructive dialogue, rather than confrontational rhetoric, is more likely to yield positive outcomes.

**Conclusion:** The questions raised by the Norwegian journalist to Narendra Modi are more than a momentary exchange; they are part of a larger narrative about the health of democracy in the 21st century. They highlight the interconnectedness of global concerns and the shared responsibility of nations to uphold fundamental freedoms.

For India, the challenge lies not only in addressing external perceptions but also in strengthening internal mechanisms that ensure the protection of press freedom and human rights. As history has shown, the true strength of a democracy lies in its ability to listen, respond, and evolve.

In this sense, the episode is not merely a critique but an opportunity—an opportunity to reaffirm commitments, bridge gaps, and reinforce the principles that form the bedrock of democratic governance.

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# One dead, 36 injured after fire, explosions at New York City shipyard

## 'Confined spaces are very dangerous operations for any rescuers'

**NEW YORK, May 23:** One person has died after a fire and two explosions Friday at a New York City shipyard, officials say.

Officials said 36 people were injured, most of them firefighters and other first responders, and one civilian died at the scene.

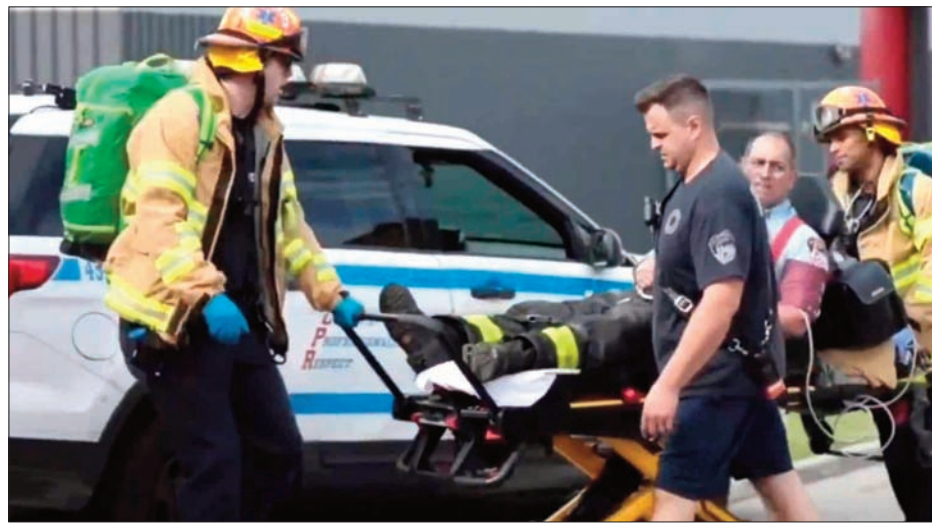
A firefighter and a fire marshal were inside the structure when a second explosion happened, and both were seriously injured by the shock wave from the blast.

"This was a complex, fast-developing emergency situation," New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani said during a news conference Friday evening. Multiple people called the fire department around 3.30 pm, reporting smoke and two workers trapped in the basement of a 150-foot by 150-foot metal structure at the back of the shipyard, Fire Commissioner Lillian Bognisore said. Firefighting and EMS crews were on the scene within six minutes. But shortly after they arrived, an explosion occurred, causing serious injuries to multiple fire department members and a couple of civilians, Bognisore said -- including one who died at the scene.

Five firefighters and rescue paramedics were searching for the trapped workers inside, on top of and next to the structure when the second blast occurred, said Chief of Department John Esposito, causing more injuries.

The most serious injuries happened to a fire marshal and a firefighter who were inside and hit by the energy wave from the blast.

"Confined spaces are very dangerous operations for any rescuers," Esposito said.



The fire marshal is in critical but stable condition with a fractured skull and a small brain bleed, said the fire department's chief medical officer Dr David Prezant.

"We will be watching him very carefully over the next 24 hours to make certain there is not subsequent brain swelling. As long as there is not, he should do well," Prezant said.

The firefighter was in serious condition when he arrived at the hospital. But Prezant said he was doing "very well" by Friday evening, and he was being observed to ensure he doesn't have muscle injuries.

The fire was still burning but under control Friday night, with more than 200 firefighters still at the scene, Mamdani said. A comprehensive investigation into the cause of the fire will begin as soon as possible, he said.

Richard Oviogor, who was in the area, told WABC-TV that he heard two explosions and what seemed like a "big shock wave". The area is home to several businesses, including a coffee roasting company and a self-storage facility. The shipyard used to be owned by the Bethlehem Steel Company, which built ships for the US Navy during World War II. (AP)

# 40,000 people under evacuation orders after a chemical tank leak in Southern California

**GARDEN GROVE (CALIFORNIA), May 23:** About 40,000 people were under evacuation orders and schools shut down Friday in Southern California after a storage tank continued to leak a hazardous chemical used to make plastic parts that officials said could rupture or explode.

A storage tank holding between 22,700 and 26,500 litres of methyl methacrylate overheated Thursday and began venting vapours into the air at an aerospace plastics facility in Garden Grove, a city in Orange County, the county's fire authority said.

Officials ordered residents in Garden Grove to leave and expanded evacuations orders Friday to some residents of five other Orange County cities -- Cypress, Stanton, Anaheim, Buena Park and Westminster -- after being unable to stop the leak overnight on the tank at GKN Aerospace, which makes parts for commercial and military aircraft.

"This is not precautionary. ... This thing is going to fail, and we don't know when," said Garden Grove Fire Chief Craig Covey during a Friday afternoon press conference. "We're doing our best to figure out when or how we can prevent it."

Covey said the tank could fail and crack, releasing the chemical



onto the ground, or it could explode.

"We understand that this is frightening," Garden Grove Mayor Stephanie Klopfenstein said at the news conference. "But the evacuation orders are in place for your safety."

Covey said crews have created containment barriers with sandbags in case there is a chemical spill from the tank to prevent the chemical from getting into storm drains or reaching creeks or the nearby ocean.

He said the chemical is highly

volatile, toxic and flammable.

"We are setting up these evacuations in preparation for these two options: it fails, or it blows up," Covey said earlier in a video update posted on social media. "Please follow our requests and orders for evacuations."

Crews were initially successful and were able to neutralise one of two damaged tanks but Covey said they determined Friday morning that the remaining tank was "in the biggest crisis".

No injuries or deaths have been reported, authorities said. (AP)

## Ukrainian drone attack triggers fire at Russian oil terminal

**KYIV, May 23:** A Ukrainian drone attack caused a fire at another Russian oil terminal overnight, local officials in Russia's Krasnodar region said Saturday, in what appeared to be the latest attack on Moscow's vital oil industry.

Authorities in the city of Novorossiysk said falling drone debris sparked a fire at an oil terminal, injuring two people, without naming the facility.

Russia's Astra news outlet said Ukrainian drones struck the Shekharis oil terminal and depot, the terminus for Russian state-controlled pipeline company Transneft's main oil pipelines in the region.

Images posted by Astra appeared to show smoke rising above the oil terminal, but they could not be verified. Ukraine did not immediately comment on the attack.

Ukraine has expanded its mid-and long-range strike capabilities, deploying drone and missile technology that it has developed domestically to battle Russia's 4-year-old invasion.

Attacks on Russian oil assets that play a key part in funding the invasion have become almost daily occurrences.

Meanwhile, the death toll from a Ukrainian drone strike overnight into Friday on a college dormitory building in Starobilsk, a city in Ukraine's Russia-occupied Luhansk region, rose to 12, Moscow-installed officials said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday denounced the attack on the dormitory as a "crime" and ordered the military to submit its proposals for retaliation. He said there were no military or law enforcement facilities near the college.

At a UN Security Council emergency meeting on the strike, held at the request of Russia, Ukrainian Ambassador Melnyk Andrii denied his Russian counterpart's accusations of war crimes, calling them a "pure propaganda show" and asserting that the May 22 operations "exclusively targeted the Russian war machine." (AP)

## Congo curtails funeral wakes in Ebola outbreak as WHO upgrades risk assessment

**BUNIA (CONGO), May 23:** Authorities in northeastern Congo banned funeral wakes and gatherings of more than 50 people Friday in an effort to curb a rapidly spreading Ebola outbreak in a region where medical workers have struggled with a lack of resources and pushback from angry residents.

The World Health Organization said that the outbreak now poses a "very high" risk for Congo -- up from a previous categorisation of "high" -- but that the risk of the disease spreading globally remains low.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said 82 cases and seven deaths have been confirmed in Congo, but that the outbreak is believed to be "much larger".

There is no available vaccine for the Bundibugyo virus, which spread undetected for weeks in Congo's Ituri Province following the first known death while authorities tested for another, more common, Ebola virus and came up negative. There are now 750 suspected cases and 177 suspected deaths, though more are expected as surveillance expands.

"We are trying to catch up," Congo Foreign Minister Thérèse Kayikwamba Wagner told the AP. "It is a race against the clock."

Supplies were being rushed to Ituri in the northeastern corner of the country, where nearly a million people have been displaced by armed conflicts over mineral resources. Ramping up contact tracing is a priority, Kayikwamba Wagner said.

In the provincial capital of Bunia, AP reporters saw empty emergency treatment centers, and doctors in the nearby town of Bambu using expired medical masks while tending to suspected Ebola patients. (PTI)

# Trump veers off-topic during speech in New York that was supposed to be on economy

**NEW YORK, May 23:** President Donald Trump, from a toss-up congressional district in New York on Friday, began testing his midterm message that was ostensibly on the economy.

But he veered off-topic right from the start, going off on tangents about voter identification, crime in cities, transgender women in sports and "Dumocrats", his new chosen moniker for the opposition party. He complained that toiletries are locked up in pharmacies, making them harder to buy, and polled the audience on what he should call his predecessor, former President Joe Biden.

Eventually, he landed on the topic of the speech, telling the crowd that he and his party worked to slash taxes and increase take-home pay, while Democrats opposed the effort at every turn.

"I cut your taxes, cut the taxes on workers, families, small business, who are the soul of this state," Trump said to the audience at Rockland Community College. Listing off the various provisions of the tax law, the president said: "These are all Republican tax cuts. The Democrats voted against every one of these tax cuts."

Trump traveled to the Hudson Valley area to appear with Republican Rep. Mike Lawler, who is up for reelection in what will be one of the most closely watched House races this November, for an event meant to promote the tax law Trump signed last year, particularly the quadrupling of the deduction for state and local taxes, which is critical in a high-tax state like New York.

Trump called Lawler "fantastic" and mused about how the congressman was a "pain in the ass" as he badgered the administration on expanding the deduction.

He pulled Lawler onstage during the event, and the congressman thanked the

president "for working with me to deliver a big win" for the people in his district. He said that more than 90 per cent of the people in his district were able to fully deduct their state and local taxes.

Also appearing with the president at the event Friday was Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman, the Trump-backed Republican candidate for New York governor. Trump said, "Guys like Mike Lawler, guys like Bruce Blakeman, you put them in, they'll turn it around."

**Trying to reverse a slumping approval rating**

The White House has been looking for more opportunities to highlight Trump's economic accomplishments as his approval rating on the economy has slumped. About one-third of US adults approve of how Trump is handling the economy, according to a new AP-NORC poll, down slightly from 40 per cent at the start of Trump's second term. Trump had promised to bring prices down, but gasoline prices have surged this year due to the war in Iran.

Lawler is just one of three House Republicans who represent a district won by Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris in 2024. Unlike the other two -- retiring Nebraska Rep. Don Bacon and Pennsylvania Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick, who's been a critic of Trump policies -- Lawler has chosen to embrace the polarizing president in hopes of not alienating Republican voters who support the party's leader.

"Look, the people who hate the president -- and that's their sole basis for their vote -- are likely never voting for me, and you know, obviously, you need to turn out your base, and you need people energised," Lawler told The Associated Press in an interview on the sidelines of the White House congressional picnic earlier this week.

## Coal mine gas explosion in China kills 90

**BEIJING, May 23:** Ninety miners were killed in a gas explosion in a coal mine in north China, official media in Beijing reported on Saturday, adding that 201 miners have so far been rescued.

The gas explosion occurred at the Liushenyu coal mine on Friday evening. Rescue efforts are ongoing.

The death toll rose to 90 following a coal mine accident in Qinyuan County in north China's Shanxi Province, state-run China Daily reported.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has issued instructions for a comprehensive rescue operation and treatment of the injured.

He has called for proper handling of the aftermath of the accident and sought a thorough investigation into its cause, with accountability pursued in accordance with the law.

Xi has stressed that authorities across the country must learn from the accident, remain vigilant on workplace safety, and intensify efforts to identify and eliminate potential risks to prevent major accidents. As China enters its flood season, Xi also called for strengthened emergency preparedness and solid flood control and disaster relief measures to safeguard people's lives and property. Vice Premier Zhang Guoqing has led a team to the site to oversee the rescue efforts. (PTI)

# Major Abhilasha Barak of India to receive 2025 UN Military Gender Advocate of the Year Award

**UNITED NATIONS, May 23:** Indian peacekeeper serving with the UN mission in Lebanon, Major Abhilasha Barak, has been named the recipient of a prestigious military gender advocate award by the world body.

Barak has been honoured with the 2025 United Nations Military Gender Advocate of the Year Award for her outreach efforts with women and girls during her deployment in the West Asian nation.

"Proud to announce that Major Abhilasha Barak has been awarded the 2025 @UN Military Gender Advocate of the Year Award. She is being recognised for her outreach and community engagement activities for women and adolescent girls and gender sensitisation training for peacekeepers," the Permanent Mission of India to the UN said in a post on X Friday.

Barak is serving with the Indian Battalion as the Commander of the Female Engagement Team (FET) in UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). She is also the first woman combat helicopter pilot of the Indian Army. She will be honoured at the UN headquarters when the world body commemorates the International Day of UN Peacekeepers that is marked annually on May 29.

In a moment of pride for India, Barak is the third recipient of the award from the country, following Major Suman Gawani and Major Radhika Sen, who were honoured for their commendable work while serving in UN Peacekeeping missions. Gawani had served with the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and received the 2019 United Nations Military Gender Advocate of the Year Award. She



was a co-recipient of the 2019 recognition along with Commander Carla Monteiro de Castro Araujo, a Brazilian Naval officer working in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). Major Radhika Sen, who served

with the United Nations Organization Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), received the prestigious 2023 United Nations Military Gender Advocate of the Year Award. Created in 2016 by the Office of Military Affairs within the Department for Peace Operations (DPO),

the award recognises the dedication and efforts of an individual military peacekeeper in promoting the principles of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. It underlines the contribution of the military peacekeeper who has best integrated a gender perspective into peacekeeping activities. Each year, the awardee is selected from among candidates nominated by Force Commanders and Heads of Mission from all peace operations, according to UN Peacekeeping.

India is among the largest troop and police contributing countries to UN peacekeeping missions. As of February 2026, UNIFIL's force consists of 7,538 peacekeepers from 48 troop-contributing countries, including 642 personnel from India, the fourth highest after Italy (784), Indonesia (756) and Spain (660). (PTI)

# Pak Army chief holds talks with top Iran leaders amid efforts to bring peace in West Asia

**ISLAMABAD, May 23:** Pakistan's Army chief Field Marshal Asim Munir, who is in Tehran, amid discussions to end the West Asia conflict, has held talks separately with Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian, Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, local media reported Saturday.

Munir flew to Tehran on Friday for a crucial visit to expedite efforts for a peace deal between the US and Iran, said the Pakistan Army, adding that the visit was "part of ongoing mediation efforts".

He was received in Tehran by Iran's Interior Minister Eskandar Momeni. Pakistan's Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi -- believed to be close to Munir -- was already in Tehran and engaging with top Iranian officials when the field marshal landed there. This is Munir's second trip to Iran in just over a month.

According to a statement issued by Iran's government, Munir met Araghchi on Friday to "discuss diplomatic efforts aimed at preventing further escalation and promoting peace, stability, and security in West Asia".

Iran's state-run IRNA news agency reported that talks between the two leaders went late into the night. On Saturday, the field marshal held talks with President Pezeshkian. "The two sides discussed bilateral relations between Iran and Pakistan, as well as regional developments and ways to strengthen cooperation in various fields," Iran's semi-official Tasnim news agency said.

According to the news agency, Munir also met Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf separately on Saturday -- and their talks "focused on



regional and bilateral issues".

Islamabad has not specifically commented on these meetings. Pakistan has emerged as a mediator in the West Asia conflict, which has triggered severe energy shortages and impacted economies across the world. Several analysts say that Islamabad enjoys the confidence of both Tehran and Washington.

Islamabad hosted senior leaders of both sides last month for talks, the first of its kind since 1979, but the parties failed to clinch a peace deal.

The key sticking points are Iran's nuclear programme and control over the Strait of Hormuz, which hosts roughly one-fifth of the world's energy supplies in normal times. Shippings through the Strait have been severely disrupted since February 28, when the US and Israel launched joint attacks on Iran, triggering retaliatory strikes.

The disruptions continue even though a fragile ceasefire has been in place since April 8. The developments come at a time when, according to a report in US media outlet Axios, President Donald Trump is "seriously considering" launching fresh strikes against Iran if last-minute negotiations do not result in a peace deal. (PTI)

# Pope Leo visits Italy's 'Land of Fires' as families seek justice for children lost to toxic waste

**ACERRA (ITALY), May 23:** Families living in a toxic-waste polluted area around Naples were preparing to meet Pope Leo XIV during his pastoral visit on Saturday, carrying with them years of grief, anger and hopes for justice after losing children to cancer linked to a multi-billion mafia racket of dumping toxic waste.

The visit to the so-called Terra dei Fuochi, or Land of Fires, comes on the eve of the 11th anniversary of Pope Francis' big ecological encyclical Laudato Si (Praised Be), and indicates

Leo's interest in carrying on his predecessor's environmental agenda.

The European Court of Human Rights last year validated a generation of residents' complaints that mafia dumping, burial and burning of toxic waste led to an increased rate of cancer and other ailments in the area of 90 municipalities around Caserta and Naples, encompassing a population of 2.9 million people.

The court found Italian authorities had known since 1988 about the toxic pollution, blamed on the Camorra crime

syndicate that controls waste disposal, but failed to take necessary steps to protect residents' lives. The binding ruling gave Italy two years to set up a database about the toxic waste and verified health risks associated with living there.

The pope will visit the city of Acerra to meet families who lost young relatives to cancer, the human cost of environmental pollution. Bishop Antonio Di Donna estimated 150 young people died in the city of some 58,000 over the past three decades. (AP)

Pork sale banned in several districts

## Nagaland intensifies ASF containment measures

**KOHIMA, May 23:** The Nagaland government has intensified surveillance and containment measures following the outbreak of African Swine Fever (ASF) in various parts of the state, while several districts imposed bans and restrictions on the import, transport and sale of pigs and pork products to prevent the spread of the disease.

The Directorate of Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Services has been closely monitoring the situation through district veterinary officers and field staff who are actively engaged in surveillance, containment, awareness campaigns, sample collection and implementation of bio-security measures to prevent further spread of ASF, an official statement said here.

In Mon, the administration has imposed a temporary ban on the sale of pork across the district and prohibited the import, export and transportation of live pigs until further orders. In Dimapur district, authorities have identified infected and surveillance zones after ASF-positive cases were confirmed in pigs at Signal Angami village. The movement, slaughter and transportation of pigs, pork and related products have been restricted within the affected areas.

In Medziphema subdivision of Chumoukedima district, the slaughter and sale of pigs and pork



have been regulated, with prior permission made mandatory before any commercial slaughter or sale. Mokokchung district authorities have also advised the public to avoid purchase and consumption of pork in affected areas under Tuli subdivision, where ASF outbreaks were confirmed in Chungtia and Kangtsungyimsen villages and Shitikolok ward of Tuli town.

Restrictions and bans related to pig import and transportation were also imposed in parts of Peren and Niuiland districts following ASF concerns. Following the restrictions, pork shops in several parts, including Kohima, remained closed on Saturday.

Pork is one of the most preferred delicacies in Nagaland and forms an essential part of daily meals and traditional cuisine across communities in the state. The ASF outbreak and the resulting restrictions

are therefore expected to have a significant impact on local consumption patterns, markets and the livelihoods of thousands of pig farmers and traders dependent on the pork economy.

The directorate clarified that ASF is a highly contagious viral disease affecting pigs, but it does not infect humans and is not a public health concern. However, it warned that the disease can cause severe economic losses to pig farmers and therefore requires immediate reporting and strict preventive action.

Appealing for public cooperation, the directorate urged pig farmers, traders, transporters, village councils, colony authorities and citizens to extend full support to it during the ongoing crisis. The advisory directed the public to immediately report any sudden sickness or death of pigs to the nearest

veterinary institution or office. It also cautioned against unauthorised movement, sale or transportation of pigs and pork products from affected areas.

Farmers and pig rearers have been further advised to maintain strict farm hygiene and bio-security measures to reduce the risk of transmission. The directorate also instructed the public not to dispose of dead pigs in rivers, streams, forests or open public places, warning that improper disposal could worsen the outbreak.

The directorate additionally appealed to the public to avoid panic and refrain from spreading unverified information related to ASF.

It appreciated the prompt support extended by the district administrations and lauded the efforts of chief veterinary officers, veterinary doctors, veterinary field assistants and mobile veterinary units working tirelessly on the ground to contain the outbreak.

The directorate also requested the dissemination of only verified information issued by it to prevent misinformation and unnecessary panic among citizens.

Reaffirming its commitment to safeguarding the livestock sector, the directorate stated that it would continue scientific and administrative interventions to protect the livelihoods of pig farmers across Nagaland. (PTI)

## Case of six abducted Naga villagers to be handed over to NIA: Manipur CM

**IMPHAL, May 23:** Manipur Chief Minister Y. Khemchand Singh on Saturday said the case relating to the abduction of six Naga villagers by armed militants would be handed over to the NIA.

The announcement came during a meeting between a six-member delegation of the United Naga Council (UNC) and the chief minister, according to an official statement.

The UNC delegation was led by its president, NG Lorho, while the government side included Deputy Chief Minister Losii Dikho, Home Minister Govindas Konhoujam and several Naga MLAs.

During the meeting, the UNC urged the government to intensify efforts to trace the six villagers abducted from Konsakhul in Kangpokpi district.

"The Chief Minister informed the UNC delegation that the case of the six abducted Naga villagers would be handed over to the NIA," the statement said.

The killing of three church leaders in Kangpokpi district on May 13 had already been transferred to the central agency for investigation, it added.

Singh said search and rescue op-



erations had been underway since May 14 to trace the missing villagers.

He appealed to the UNC to help secure the release of 14 Kuki civilians who, according to the government, have also remained in captivity since the violence erupted.

The chief minister further appealed to Kuki organisations and communities to cooperate in tracing the six missing Naga villagers.

He urged all communities in the state to support the government's efforts to restore peace and nor-

malcy. Several people were allegedly abducted and held hostage by armed groups in Kangpokpi and Senapati districts on May 13, hours after three church leaders were killed in an ambush.

Of them, 31 people -- 14 Nagas, 16 Kukis and one Meitei -- have been released, according to the police.

Kuki Inpi Manipur, the apex body of the Kuki tribes in the state, claimed that 14 members of the community continued to be held hostage by Naga groups. (PTI)

### Thunderstorms expected in Nagaland till May 25



**HT Correspondent**

**DIMAPUR, May 23:** The Nagaland State Disaster Management Authority (NSDMA) warned of thunderstorms accompanied by lightning, gusty winds, and heavy rainfall in several districts of the state till May 25.

In its weather update, the NSDMA said districts, including Peren, Dimapur, Kohima, Wokha, and Mokokchung, are likely to experience heavy rain accompanied by thunderstorms, lightning, and gusty winds of 30 to 40 kilometres per hour.

Mon, Longleng, Tuensang, and Zunheboto districts are also expected to witness thunderstorms with lightning during the period.

Thunderstorms with lightning are likely at isolated places in Peren, Dimapur, Kohima, Wokha, Mokokchung, Longleng, and Mon districts on May 25.

The update said weather conditions are expected to remain generally stable across Nagaland on May 26.

## Nagaland Police appeal to people to maintain peace, social harmony

**KOHIMA, May 23:** Amid concerns over the prevailing law and order situation in a neighbouring state and the possibility of disturbances spilling over into Nagaland, the state police urged citizens to maintain peace, communal harmony and vigilance.

Nagaland Director General of Police Rupin Sharma appealed to the people to act responsibly and refrain from sharing or forwarding any unverified information, rumours or provocative social media content that could create panic, misunderstanding or communal tension.

In an appeal issued on Friday, the police cautioned against the spread of false and misleading narratives through social media, stating that in the age of artificially generated content, the creation and circulation of fake information has become easier and more dangerous.

The advisory came amid search operations being conducted in Manipur's Kangpokpi district to rescue those who are still being held hostage by armed groups.

Thirty-one of around 38 people belonging to the Kuki and Naga communities, who were held in captivity by armed groups in Kangpokpi and Senapati districts in Manipur, 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 the neighbouring state.

Citizens have also been urged not to react emotionally to developments outside Nagaland and to avoid being influenced by rumours or provocative narratives circulating online.

The Nagaland Police assured that the situation is being closely monitored and that all necessary measures are in place to maintain law and order in the state.

It emphasised that public cooperation remains essential in ensuring continued peace and stability.

Citizens have been advised to exercise utmost caution while consuming or sharing online content, especially material capable of disturbing ethnic and inter-community relations in the state, the Nagaland Police statement said.

### Nagaland directs unauthenticated employees to submit identity documents

**HT Correspondent**

**DIMAPUR, May 23:** The Nagaland government has directed all unauthenticated state government employees to mandatorily submit identity documents for verification and authentication under the personal information management system (PIMS).

According to a notification issued by the personnel & administrative reforms (P&AR) department through PIMS cell on May 22, the move has been initiated to strengthen employee authentication and ensure better governance.

The department stated that the state government had earlier issued several instructions to departments and employees for linking Aadhaar with PIMS through official memorandums issued on June 14, 2018, August 2, 2018, October 29, 2018, and July 28, 2021.

However, a significant number of employees are yet to complete the Aadhaar linkage process, resulting in failure of identity authentication, it said.

The notification directed all unauthenticated employees to submit their identity documents to their respective departments for onward submission to the P&AR department.

As per the notification, Aadhaar has been prescribed as the first option for authentication.

In cases where Aadhaar is unavailable or an employee refuses to provide Aadhaar, the employees may alternatively submit any two of the documents such as PAN card, driving licence, Indian passport, bank passbook of the salary account, HSLC or equivalent Class X admit card displaying photograph, father's name and date of birth in accordance with the Aadhaar Authentication for Good Governance (Social Welfare, Innovation, Knowledge) Rules, 2020.

The government also directed all unauthenticated employees to comply with the order and submit the required documents to their respective departments on or before June 3.

## MYC members stage protest outside CM bungalow over abductions

More than 38 people were abducted and held hostage by armed groups in Kangpokpi and Senapati districts on May 13, hours after three church leaders were killed in an ambush in Kangpokpi district



**IMPHAL, May 23:** At least six members of the Manipur Youth Congress on Saturday afternoon banged the gates of the chief minister's bungalow here to symbolically "wake the CM up" and demanded the immediate release of civilians held hostage by militants.

Chief Minister Y. Khemchand Singh, however, was not inside the complex, which also houses the CM secretariat, when the incident happened.

The Youth Congress members banged the gates of the complex and raised slogans like "wake up, sleeping CM" and "we condemn killing of civilians, down down BJP".

They also held placards that read "BJP Hatao, Manipur Bachao" and "Youth Congress demands immediate release of civilian hostages".

The CM's official residence is located less than 100 metres from the Manipur Police headquarters.

However, after a brief scuffle with the police personnel deployed in the area, the protesters were pushed back to some distance.

Manipur Youth Congress president W. Anand, who led the protesters, said, "We had come to wake up the CM and BJP MLAs who are in deep slumber. There is no rule of law in the state."

More than 38 people were abducted and held hostage by armed groups in Kangpokpi and Senapati districts on May 13, hours after three church leaders were killed in an ambush in Kangpokpi district.

Of them, 31 people have been released, including 12 Naga women and 16 Kukis. Six Naga men, however, continued to be held hostage and their whereabouts are not yet known.

Kuki Inpi Manipur, the apex body of the Kuki tribes in the state, also claimed that 14 people from the community continued to be held hostage by Naga groups. (PTI)

## Nagaland lost forest cover of 794.88 sq km in 10 yrs: Official

**HT Correspondent**

**DIMAPUR, May 23:** Chairman of the Nagaland State Biodiversity Board (NSBB) Y. Kiketho Sema recently said Nagaland witnessed a forest cover loss of about 794.88 sq km between 2013 and 2023, citing reports of the India State of Forest Report (ISFR).

Speaking at the International Day for Biological Diversity 2026 observation at St. Xavier College, Jalukie, in Peren district, Sema, who is also the principal secretary of Nagaland environment, forest and climate change department, highlighted the rich biodiversity of Nagaland.

He underscored the importance of partnership between the government and communities in biodiversity conservation, noting that more than 95% of land and forests in Nagaland belong to the community.

He said conservation efforts require the active participation and support of local communities, educational institutions, churches and civil society organisations alongside the forest department and biodiversity boards.

Referring to Article 371A, applicable in Nagaland, which grants the people of Nagaland control over land and natural resources through customary ownership systems, he appealed to the people not to destroy the state's rich biodiversity, but to protect and conserve it for future generations.

Calling for a balance between development and conservation, Sema envisioned Nagaland as a model for community-led biodiversity conservation with strong potential in eco-tourism- biodiversity, culture & community socio-capital.

He said the state lies within the ecologically significant Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot and is endowed with rich forests, wildlife, rivers, medicinal plants, orchids and traditional agro-biodiversity.

However, he expressed concern over the growing threats posed by deforestation, pollution, forest fires, soil erosion, water scarcity and the unsustainable extraction of natural resources.

He stressed that global environmental protection begins with local action.

"Small initiatives such as tree plantation, village-level conservation, community clean-up drives, sustainable lifestyles and responsible use of natural resources contribute significantly towards achieving global biodiversity goals," Sema said.

He appealed to the students and youth to become 'ambassadors of nature' through everyday conservation practices such as avoiding plastic waste, planting and protecting trees, conserving water, protecting wildlife and participating in the documentation and conservation of local biological resources through People's Biodiversity Registers (PBRs).

## Prez on three-day visit to Sikkim from May 26

**GANGTOK, May 23:** President Droupadi Murmu is scheduled to commence a three-day visit to Sikkim on May 26, officials said here on Saturday.

Murmu will land at the Libing Army helipad in the afternoon of May 26. From there, she will go to Lok Bhavan, and later visit Namgyal Institute of Tibetology at Deorali and Orchidarium at Ridge Park in Gangtok, they said.

In the morning of May 27, she will visit Nathula along the India-China border, and later attend the seventh convocation ceremony of Sikkim University, where she will confer degrees to the students of the 2023, 2024 and 2025 batches.

On May 28, the President will attend a parade of Sikkim Police at Paljor Stadium and leave the state the same day, the officials added. (PTI)

## Arunachal likely to experience heavy rainfall from Sunday

**ITANAGAR, May 23:** Arunachal Pradesh is likely to experience widespread heavy rainfall accompanied by thunderstorms and lightning from Sunday, with the India Meteorological Department (IMD) alerting people to remain prepared for downpour over the next five days.

According to the district-wise warning map issued by the Meteorological Centre here on Saturday, the weather system is expected to intensify on May 24, particularly over central and eastern districts.

Upper Siang, Siang and parts of West Siang have been placed under 'orange' alert (be prepared), indicating the possibility of heavy to very heavy rainfall with thunderstorms and lightning. 'Yellow' alert (be aware) has been issued for adjoining districts, including Lower Dibang Valley, East Siang,



Shi-Yomi and Upper Subansiri, indicating adverse weather conditions.

The forecast also indicates widespread thunderstorm activity across several districts of western and southern Arunachal Pradesh, including Papum Pare, Pakke-Kessang, Lower Siang, Leparada,

Kra Daadi and Kurung Kumey.

Light to moderate rainfall is likely to occur in many places, while isolated areas may witness intense spells of rain and lightning.

The weather is expected to gradually improve from Monday onwards, although intermittent rain and thunderstorms are expected to

persist in parts of the state.

On May 25 and 26, most districts have been placed under the 'yellow alert' category, indicating the possibility of moderate rainfall and thunderstorms.

By May 27, weather conditions are expected to stabilise considerably across Arunachal Pradesh, with no major warning issued for most of the districts except isolated areas likely to witness light rain and thunderstorms.

The IMD has advised residents, especially those living in vulnerable and low-lying areas, to remain alert due to the possibility of water-logging, landslides, flash floods and disruption in road connectivity during the period of intense rainfall.

Authorities have also been urged to remain prepared in districts where an 'orange' alert has been issued. (PTI)

## Meghalaya SSLC pass percentage rises to 97.26 after supplementary results

**SHILLONG, May 23:** The overall pass percentage in the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) Examination 2026 in Meghalaya rose to 97.26 per cent following the declaration of supplementary examination results by the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE) recently.

According to official figures, 5,063 students passed the supplementary examination out of 5,631 candidates who appeared across 74 examination centres, registering a pass percentage of 90.16 per cent.

With the latest results, the total number of students who successfully cleared the SSLC examination this year increased to 47,291 out of 48,623 candidates who appeared for the examination. (NNN)

# Centre offers constitutional safeguards, legislative body for Ladakh

**NEW DELHI, May 23:** The Centre has made an offer for constitutional safeguards under Article 371, instead of the Sixth Schedule, and a legislative body for Ladakh, activists from the region said on Saturday, while stressing that discussions were still underway and no final agreement had been reached.

Talking to PTI a day after their meeting with a sub-committee of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), activist Sonam Wangchuk said the government had proposed safeguards for Ladakh on the lines of Articles 371A and 371G and agreed in principle to a governance structure for the entire region rather than limiting powers to district councils.

Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA) member Sajjad Kargili told PTI that the Centre had also proposed legislative, executive, administrative and financial powers for Ladakh and had been asked to share a formal draft for consultations with legal and constitutional experts.

The meeting between representatives of the Leh Apex Body (LAB), KDA and the MHA sub-committee on Friday focused on constitutional protection for

Ladakh, democratic representation and the long-pending demand for statehood.

According to Wangchuk, the discussions centred on Ladakh's demand for inclusion under the Sixth Schedule and statehood, while the government suggested safeguards under Article 371.

"The government said it has some issues with the Sixth Schedule but is willing to consider protections under Article 371," Wangchuk said.

Article 371 grants temporary, transitional and special provisions to some states to accommodate their unique socio-cultural and regional developmental needs.

Under the Sixth Schedule, special administrative and legislative protections are given for tribal areas in certain northeastern states through Autonomous District Councils with powers over land, forests, local governance customs and certain civil and judicial matters.

No formal statement has been issued by the Centre.

Wangchuk noted that earlier proposals had envisaged powers remaining confined to district councils in Leh and Kargil, with major decisions continuing to rest

with the Lieutenant Governor and bureaucracy.

"Yesterday, they agreed that whatever constitutional arrangement is created will be at the level of the whole of Ladakh and not at the district level," he said, calling it a significant departure from earlier proposals.

Explaining the demands, Wangchuk divided them into three broad categories -- legislative, executive and financial powers.

Under the proposed framework, he said, an elected institution representing the whole of Ladakh would have powers to make laws, oversee administration and exercise financial authority.

"This is a very big change," Wangchuk said, pointing out that elected representatives currently exercise limited control over Ladakh's annual budget while most decisions are taken by officials and the Lieutenant Governor.

"The best arrangement in India is a state. We are moving in the direction of a UT with legislature or statehood," he said.

Wangchuk indicated that the Centre's main reservation regarding statehood related to Ladakh's financial viability and ability to sustain administrative expenditure



through its own revenue.

"Their objection was mainly about income and resources," he said, adding that studies were being undertaken to assess Ladakh's economic capacity and future revenue potential.

At the same time, Wangchuk cautioned against treating the latest discussions as a final settlement.

"There is no reason either for disappointment or excitement. This is a work in progress. There is an in-principle understanding, not an agreement," he said.

Kargili, meanwhile, underscored that the government had placed a proposal before the delegation but that its contents needed careful examination.

"A proposal has been submitted by the government. It says safeguards will be given to Ladakh under Articles 371A and 371G, and legislative, executive, administrative and financial powers will also be given," he said.

Article 371A applies to Nagaland and provides that the Parliament cannot legislate on matters

relating to the Naga religion, social practices, customary law, land rights, and civil and criminal justice, without the consent of the state assembly. Similar protections have been given under Article 371G to Mizoram.

Kargili said the LAB and KDA had requested the government to provide a written draft similar to the memorandum already submitted by Ladakh representatives.

"We asked the government to give us a draft so that we can discuss it with our legal and constitutional experts and then give our response," Kargili said.

While welcoming continued engagement, Kargili stressed that the process remained at a preliminary stage. "There is neither disappointment nor excitement. This is only a dialogue, and we can speak further once we receive the draft," he said.

He described the continuation of the talks itself as encouraging.

"Dialogue is also positivity. It is not positive to stop talking," Kargili said, adding that both sides appeared committed to finding a mutually acceptable solution.

Referring to the atmosphere of the meeting, he said the MHA had emphasised that discussions were

not taking place "as two opposing sides but as one", with the shared objective of addressing concerns of Ladakh's people.

"The people of Ladakh should maintain regional sensitivity, diversity and balance. People should get representation and respect," Kargili said, outlining the broader concerns raised during the talks.

No date has yet been fixed for the next round of discussions, though Kargili said the delegation had requested the government to share the draft before convening another meeting.

The two prominent civil society groups from Ladakh -- Leh Apex Body (LAB) and Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA) -- have been jointly demanding statehood for Ladakh, constitutional safeguards for land and jobs, and greater democratic powers since Ladakh became a Union Territory without a legislature in 2019.

In a joint statement, after the sub-committee meeting here, both groups said they have reached an "in-principle understanding" with the Government of India on restoring democracy in Ladakh and providing constitutional safeguards on the lines of Nagaland, Sikkim and Mizoram under Article 371. (PTI)

## US Secretary of State Marco Rubio meets Prime Minister Modi

**NEW DELHI, May 23:** US Secretary of State Marco Rubio met Prime Minister Narendra Modi here on Saturday after arriving for his first official visit to India -- a trip aimed at recalibrating the bilateral relations that have faced headwinds since mid-last year.

The top US diplomat is scheduled to hold wide-ranging talks with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, in addition to attending a meeting of the Quad foreign ministers in New Delhi.

"Landed in India. Looking forward to a great visit," Rubio said in a social media post after he reached Kolkata this morning.

He visited the Mother House -- the headquarters of Saint Teresa's Missionaries of Charity -- before flying to the national capital.

"Warmly welcome Secretary of State Marco Rubio of the USA to New Delhi. His visit will add further strength to India-USA Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership," Ministry of External Affairs Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said on X.

US Ambassador Sergio Goro, welcoming the Secretary of State, outlined a forward-looking agenda aimed at strengthening bilateral ties. He underlined the upcoming Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting and Washington's focus on realising President Donald Trump's strategic vision for a stronger US-India partnership.

Rubio called on Prime Minister Narendra Modi after reaching the national capital.

On Sunday, he is scheduled to hold bilateral talks with Jaishankar and attend the US Embassy's Independence Day celebrations.

The Secretary of State will travel to Agra and Jaipur on Monday before returning to Delhi on Tuesday morning for the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

Ways to bolster India-US ties in energy, trade, investment, critical technology and people-to-people exchanges are likely to dominate the talks between Jaishankar and Rubio, people familiar with the matter said.

The two sides are also expected to deliberate on the West Asia crisis and its economic impact, including on energy supplies, they said. (PTI)

## BJP, CPI(M) target Kerala govt over appointment of poll officer as CM's secretary

**THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, May 23:** The BJP and CPI(M) on Saturday criticised the Kerala government over the appointment of state CEO Rathan U Kelkar as secretary to Chief Minister V D Satheesan, alleging a contradiction in the Congress party's stand on similar appointments made in BJP-ruled states.

Kelkar, a 2003-batch IAS officer, had supervised the recent Kerala Assembly election process as the state's CEO.

According to a government order, "Rathan U Kelkar IAS (KL 2003), Chief Electoral Officer, Kerala and Secretary, Election Department, is transferred and posted as Secretary to the Chief Minister." Reacting to the development, senior BJP leader K Surendran accused the Congress of double standards in matters concerning appointments involving election officials.

"In West Bengal, when the BJP did the same, it was described as a reward for vote theft. But



in Kerala, when V D Satheesan does this, it becomes the beauty of democracy. Rahul Gandhi and company are the biggest hypocrites," Surendran said in a social media post.

Senior CPI(M) leader and former minister P Rajeev also criticised the appointment and sought clarification from the Congress leadership at the national level.

He said the Congress leadership should ex-

plain its stand on appointing the Chief Electoral Officer as the Chief Minister's secretary in Kerala, while Gandhi had strongly opposed a similar appointment in West Bengal. Rajeev said the appointment in Kerala was made even as Gandhi had raised allegations regarding the appointment of a former election official in West Bengal and termed the issue a "very serious matter".

He further alleged that Kelkar's appointment was made without even observing a "cooling period", which, according to him, was generally expected in such cases. "The same party led by Gandhi has now appointed an officer who handled election responsibilities as the chief minister's secretary," Rajeev told reporters.

He said the Congress national leadership and Gandhi should clarify their stand, especially at a time when questions were being raised in society over the credibility of the election process and the Election Commission. (PTI)

## Shivraj Singh Chouhan pens book chronicling 35-year association with Modi

**NEW DELHI, May 23:** It was the great warmth and sensitivity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi that helped the then Madhya Pradesh chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan sail through a major political crisis just before the 2023 assembly elections in his state, the senior BJP leader and now a Union minister has recalled in a new book.

The book, 'Apanan', authored by Chouhan, chronicles his 35-year-long association and experiences with Prime Minister Modi.

According to excerpts from the book, when the BJP announced its candidates for the Madhya Pradesh assembly elections in 2023, Chouhan thought it was natural that the names for the relatively weaker constituencies were declared first. "It was equally natural that my name was not included in the initial lists," he writes.

Around the same time, in a public speech, according to the book, the then Madhya Pradesh chief minister had referred to multi-generational development in the state and said, "If we are gone, we will be deeply missed."

As often happens, he writes, the opposition twisted this statement and spread the narrative that Chouhan's political career was over and some people in the oppo-

sition mocked him.

"They even remarked, 'Mamaji has already had his political last rites performed'," he writes.

The Congress party made "misinformation" the core of its election strategy and began circulating my "distorted" statement widely on social media, Chouhan writes in the book. "Perhaps they wanted to lower the morale of our party workers. I, too, felt that we had to do something to encourage our workers and shatter this illusion being created," he writes.

The Union minister writes that when he looks back on that period, he does not remember the "mockery" of the Congress, but rather the "deeply touching sensitivity shown by Modi".

Despite being extremely busy in the middle of the election campaign, the senior BJP leader said, Modi personally called him. "He (Modi) did not address me as the chief minister. With great warmth and affection, he said, 'Today I am not speaking to the chief minister, nor am I calling regarding the elections. I am speaking to my Shivraj'," Chouhan writes.

The Union minister writes that the prime minister very gently asked, "Why are you so worried? If you have any spiritual guide or guru whom you respect, go to

them and seek guidance. Spend some time in solitude and keep your mind calm, balanced, and steady".

Chouhan says he felt perhaps he (Modi) thought "I might also need some reassurance. I told him, 'Bhai Saheb, I do not want anything. I only want to work'", according to the book.

He writes in the book that Modi replied, "No, Shivraj, spend a day or two alone, look within yourself, regain your composure, and then return to work." "He (Modi) wanted me to pause, reflect inwardly, and reawaken my inner strength. His affection deeply touched my heart. A leader burdened with the responsibilities of an entire nation was also concerned about my personal state of mind; that is true sensitivity," he writes. Chouhan, a four-time former chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, said he accepted the prime minister's suggestion and went to Uttarakhnad.

"A little distance away from Rishikesh, I sat for hours in solitude on the banks of the Ganga. Watching the flowing waters and the immovable mountains, my mind gradually became clear and peaceful. It was then that I fully understood what Modi ji had done. His affection was not only personal, it was also strategic," he writes. (PTI)

## Twisha Sharma case: Husband sent in police custody

**BHOPAL, May 23:** A local court on Saturday remanded Samarth Singh, husband of former actor-model Twisha Sharma and an accused in her alleged dowry death case, in police custody for seven days, while his mother and co-accused Giribala Singh said the police were yet to contact her for recording her statement in the high-profile case.

A four-member team of doctors from AIIMS Delhi was slated to fly to Bhopal in the evening to conduct a second autopsy of Twisha Sharma following the Madhya Pradesh High Court's order.

Samarth Singh, who had been absconding for ten days after an FIR was registered against him and his mother following Twisha's death by hanging, was arrested on Friday evening after he reached the Jabalpur district court premises to surrender. He had withdrawn his pre-arrest bail petition filed in the Madhya Pradesh High Court earlier.

He was taken to Bhopal in the wee hours of Saturday and produced before Judicial Magistrate First Class Anudita Gupta who sent him in police custody for seven days. His lawyer also handed over his passport to the court.

Twisha Sharma, 33, was found hanging at her matrimonial home in Bhopal's Katara Hills area on May 12, following which an FIR was registered against her husband Samarth Singh who is a lawyer, and her mother-in-law and former district judge Giribala Singh for alleged harassment for dowry.

Giribala Singh, who is currently the chairperson of the Bhopal District Consumer Court, on Saturday said she would be happy to record her statement, but Bhopal Police had not reached out to her so far.

She could not step out of her house owing to the chaotic situation outside, she said, apparently referring to the presence of mediapersons.

A day earlier, the High Court issued a notice to her on pleas seeking cancellation of her anticipatory bail, and sought her response by May 25. Two days ago, Bhopal Police had issued a third and final notice to her after she allegedly failed to appear for recording her statement.

The High Court on Friday also ordered a second autopsy for Twisha by a specialised team from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Delhi, in response to a petition filed by her parents.

Accordingly, AIIMS Delhi constituted a medical board comprising four senior doctors to conduct a second autopsy. Chief of Forensic Medicine at AIIMS Delhi, Dr Sudhir Gupta, who set up the board, said it would fly to Bhopal by a state chartered plane at 6 pm. (PTI)

## Bihar to roll out AI policy soon: Samrat

**PATNA, May 23:** Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary on Saturday said his government would soon roll out an artificial intelligence (AI) policy as part of its plan to develop Bihar as a major AI hub.

Speaking at the inauguration of the 'Bihar AI Summit 2026' at Urja Auditorium in Patna, Choudhary said AI would play a key role in transforming governance, improving transparency and accelerating Bihar's development trajectory.

"Bihar will continue to work towards becoming an AI hub, and the government will soon bring an AI policy. Through AI, Bihar will emerge among the country's leading developed states," he said.

Choudhary urged all government departments to maximise the use of AI to ensure transparency in welfare schemes and improve public service delivery.

He specifically referred to the 'Sahyog Shivirs', grievance redressal camps launched by the state government, and said AI technology would help speed up the resolution of public complaints.

The CM said complaints received at 'Sahyog Shivirs' must be resolved within 30 days, failing which the officer concerned would face suspension on the 31st day by the Chief Minister's Office (CMO). "AI is going to become a crucial part of our lives. Today, nearly 120 crore people use mobile phones. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has brought a revolution in India's communication landscape, and AI will play a major role in shaping the future," he said.

Choudhary also credited former CM Nitish Kumar for strengthening basic infrastructure and public services in Bihar, adding that the next phase would focus on building a prosperous and technologically advanced state.

He announced that the proposed 125-km Ganga Expressway project, estimated at Rs 30,000 crore, would be completed within the next three years under the public-private partnership (PPP) model.

He further said the long-pending Vikramshila University project would finally take shape during the current financial year, while degree colleges would be opened in 211 blocks from July onward.

Model schools would also be established across all 534 blocks of Bihar, he said.

According to the plan, 10 such schools would come up in Patna, while five each would be set up in municipal corporation towns, including Gaya, Bihar Sharif, Bhagalpur, Purnea, Darbhanga, Muzaffarpur, Motihari, Hajipur and Chapra. (PTI)

## Wearable health devices emerge as lifeline for senior citizens living alone

**NEW DELHI, May 23:** In an era of nuclear families and migration-driven lifestyles, wearable biosensors, smartwatches, and remote health-monitoring devices are emerging as a lifeline for elderly parents living alone, enabling families to track their health remotely and helping doctors intervene early during medical emergencies.

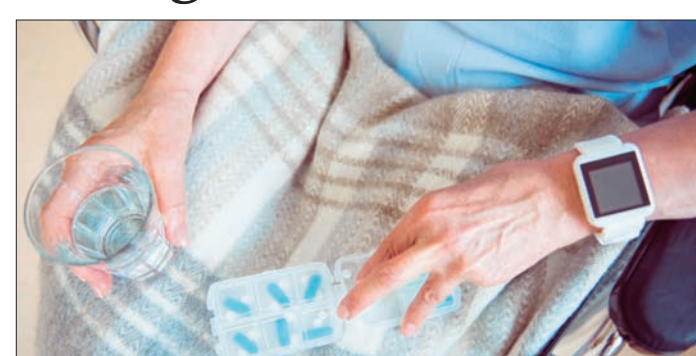
Doctors say the demand for such devices has grown sharply in recent years, particularly after the Covid pandemic underscored the importance of continuous monitoring and timely medical assistance for senior citizens suffering from chronic illnesses.

According to estimates, India currently has around 153 million people above the age of 60, a figure projected to rise to 230 million by 2036 and 347 million by 2050. Age-related ailments such as hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, dementia, arthritis, and depression are also on the rise, increasing the need for regular health supervision. Dr Neeraj Nischal, professor in the Department of Medicine at

AIIMS, Delhi, said technology is no longer merely about convenience but is increasingly becoming a vital support system for elderly individuals living alone.

"While no device can replace human companionship and emotional care, wearable biosensors and remote health-monitoring technologies are helping bridge the gap created by migration and nuclear family structures," he said.

Nischal noted that such technologies are becoming particularly relevant in urban India, where many elderly couples or individuals live independently while their children work in different cities or abroad. He said wearable monitoring devices can significantly reduce complications among elderly patients with chronic illnesses. "For conditions such as heart diseases, COPD, diabetes, and hypertension, continuous monitoring can detect early warning signs before they progress into major emergencies. "Sudden falls in oxygen saturation, irregular heart rhythms, or abnormal blood pressure patterns can be



identified early, allowing prompt medical intervention and potentially saving lives," he explained.

Dr Rahul Chandola, chairman of the Institute of Heart and Lung Disease and founder of healthcare technology platform iLive Connect, said many working professionals living in other cities or abroad remain anxious about the health and safety of their ageing parents. "As people grow older, illnesses also begin to appear. Problems such as high blood pressure, diabetes, dementia, depression, and bone-related issues become

more common and serious with age," Chandola, who is also a cardiovascular surgeon, said.

"Children living away from their parents constantly worry about whether they are healthy or have fallen sick, whether medicines are being taken on time, or whether a medical emergency has gone unnoticed," he added.

To address these concerns, iLive Connect has a plan called iLive Connect Elder Care. The technology not only continuously monitors the health of elderly people but also ensures that a doctor

speaks with them every day.

"Available in the form of a wristwatch and a patch, the device allows doctors sitting in a remote command centre to monitor the elderly person's vital health parameters 24x7," he said.

He added that several residential societies in Delhi-NCR are now being designed to be elderly-friendly, while some RWAs and housing societies have created dedicated WhatsApp groups for senior citizens living alone, where members check on their well-being every morning. Chandola said that with the iLive Connect Elder Care device and its team of doctors, families will not only stay informed about their loved ones' condition but also have the reassurance that a doctor is always available.

Dr Anup Singh, founder head of the Department of Geriatric Medicine at IMS-BHU and nodal officer/chief of the upcoming National Centre of Ageing at BHU, said the use of wearable biosensors and smart monitoring devices is gradually increasing in India as families

seek not only emergency response systems but also preventive healthcare solutions for elderly members.

From an Indian perspective, he highlighted that falls are emerging as a major geriatric health concern due to increasing life expectancy, rising prevalence of chronic diseases, and changing family structures. Several Indian studies have shown that a significant proportion of elderly individuals experience at least one fall annually, often leading to fractures, prolonged hospitalisation, loss of independence, and increased mortality, Singh said.

He further pointed out that the delayed detection of emergencies remains a major challenge in India, particularly among elderly people living alone in urban areas or in rural regions with limited access to immediate healthcare services.

Singh added that Indian healthcare institutions and startups are increasingly exploring digital health solutions for elderly care, including remote patient monitoring, AI-enabled biosensors, and telemedicine-linked wearable systems. (PTI)

# No power can stop India from being biggest exporter of weapons in 25-30 years: Rajnath

**SHIRDI (MAHARASHTRA), May 23:** Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Saturday said no power can stop India, once considered an importer of weapons, from becoming the biggest exporter in 25-30 years.

After inaugurating an ammunition manufacturing unit in Shirdi, Singh said a nation that makes its weapons writes its own future.

He said the role of private players in defence manufacturing was negligible a few years back, which now stands at 25-30 per cent, while the government has set a target to increase it further to 50 per cent. "The private sector is not just a supplier of nuts and bolts in defence, but also a producer of state-of-the-art weapons systems," he added.

Singh said India was considered a weapons

importer, but no power can now stop it from being the biggest exporter in 25-30 years.

He said that when the government's vision and the private sector's innovation align, then the country reaches new heights.

"All have to work together to make India the hub of munitions and automation," he added.

During the rule of the British East India Company, potassium nitrate was used as raw material to make gunpowder, and the company strengthened its military capability, Singh said.

He said India has come a long way as far as its defence industry is concerned.

Singh said that while ordnance factories existed even before Independence and the defence industry is deeply rooted in the country, after Independ-



ence, there was no balance between the country's old capabilities and modern requirements.

The main reason behind this was that private players did not get the opportunities and the sector was restricted to defence PSUs and ordnance factories, the defence minister said.

He listed steps undertaken by the Central government to increase private participation in the defence sector, including policy-related reforms and liberalisation of foreign direct investment.

He said the government implemented a strategic partnership model, prepared a positive indigenisation list of 5,000 items, making it mandatory for armed forces to procure them in India.

Young innovators, too, are being encouraged, Singh added.

On the defence manufacturing unit, Singh said a golden chapter of self-reliance is being written

in India's defence and space sector.

Chief of Defence Staff Gen Anil Chauhan and Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis also attended the event.

The factory at Shirdi is built on 200 acres of land, and is expected to generate direct and indirect employment for 2,000 people and also support Medium, Small and Micro Industries. The unit will also export defence equipment to other countries, the chairman and managing director of Nibe Group, Ganesh Nibe, had said.

The unit in Ahilyanagar district will manufacture artillery bombshells and also support the aerospace segment.

Singh and Fadnis also visited the Saibaba shrine in Shirdi. (PTI)

## Kerala announces 'Operation Toofan' anti-drug campaign

**THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, May 23:** Kerala Home Minister Ramesh Chennithala on Saturday announced a comprehensive statewide anti-narcotics campaign titled "Operation Toofan: The Narco Hunt", aimed at cracking down on drug syndicates.

The minister announced the initiative after chairing his first high-level meeting of senior police officers at the Police Headquarters here.

Chennithala said the special drive would begin from June 1, coinciding with the reopening of schools after the summer vacation, and would focus on eliminating drug distribution networks, especially around educational institutions.

"The aim is to uproot gangs that are trapping children in narcotics. Those who use drugs, sell them, spread them, and those behind their supply chains will all come under strict police surveillance. A special project has been prepared for this campaign," he said.

Describing narcotics, especially synthetic drugs, as a growing threat in Kerala, the minister said the police would launch intensified operations in the coming days to eradicate the menace.

"All those connected with narcotics activities will be brought under police surveillance," he said.

Chennithala said the campaign would particularly target synthetic drug supply chains, hybrid ganja networks and repeat offenders through intelligence-based and data-driven enforcement measures.

He said the Kerala Police chief would coordinate with police heads of other states to dismantle interstate narcotics mafias.

Special monitoring would also be introduced to check the inflow of chemical and synthetic narcotics as well as hybrid ganja into the state, he added.

The minister warned of strict action against the sale of tobacco products and narcotic substances near schools.

"Strict action will also be taken against drug-linked activities in five-star hotels, DJ parties and parties conducted in backwaters and coastal areas," he said.

Chennithala also announced a series of reforms aimed at improving police functioning and public accessibility in police stations across Kerala.

He said all 484 police stations in the state would undergo a major transformation and be converted into people-friendly public service centres.

"Any person arriving at a police station should be treated not as a criminal, but as a citizen deserving dignity. Visitors should be received with a 'Good Morning' or 'Namaskaram'," he said.

The minister said police personnel would be duty-bound to hear and address complaints with fairness and sensitivity.

He also directed steps to maintain cleanliness in police stations and instructed the DGP to initiate action under the Police Act to auction and remove abandoned and long-pending seized vehicles lying in station premises.

Chennithala further said strong measures would be taken in cases involving crimes against women and children, while the Janamithiri policing initiative and the Student Police Cadet programme would be strengthened to steer the younger generation away from criminal activities. He said technology would be utilised more effectively to reduce traffic accidents and tackle cyber crimes.

The minister said police would take stringent action against fraud through loan apps, social media abuse, attempts to spread communal hatred online and cryptocurrency-related scams.

He added that he would discuss with Chief Minister V D Sathesnan the need for additional personnel and technological infrastructure to handle cybercrime cases more effectively.

New mobile applications and IT-based systems would also be introduced to improve road safety and reduce accidents, he said.

The police training syllabus would be revised as part of wider modernisation efforts, the minister added. (PTI)

## International ties purposefully structured to serve India's youth: PM

**NEW DELHI, May 23:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday said India's international partnerships are purposefully structured to serve the country's youth and leaders of global corporations, representing dozens of nations, have talked about India's youth and its technological advancement.

After virtually distributing appointment letters for central government jobs to more than 51,000 youths at a 'Rozgar Mela', Modi also said the youth will play a crucial role in realising the vision of a 'Viksit Bharat' (developed India) in the years to come.

Sharing insights from his just-concluded five-country tour, the prime minister conveyed the excitement that leaders of global corporations, representing dozens of nations, had expressed about India's youth and its technological advancement.

"The world wants to be a part of India's development journey," he said. Modi made it clear that India's international partnerships are purposefully structured to serve its youth. "The purpose is that India's youth get employment and global exposure," he said.

Elaborating on the diplomatic and economic outcomes of his visits to the UAE, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway and Italy, the PM



outlined sector-specific agreements forged and dialogues held with each nation.

He said discussions were held on semiconductors, water, agriculture and advanced manufacturing with the Netherlands; on cooperation in the fields of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital innovation with Sweden; on green technology and maritime cooperation with Norway; MoUs signed on strategic energy and technology partnerships with the UAE; and agreements signed on defence, critical minerals and science and technology with Italy.

Modi underlined the long-range significance of these collaborations and said these are the sectors

that will shape industries, defining global growth for the next 25 years.

Citing the ASML-Tata Electronics agreement as a concrete example of India's growing stature as a trusted global supply chain partner, he pointed out that India is among only a handful of countries with which the Dutch semiconductor giant has signed an accord. He said partnerships with Sweden on AI and cooperation with the UAE on supercomputing would similarly bolster India's technological capabilities. "This ASML-Tata Electronics agreement alone will create thousands of new employment opportunities in India," he said.

Highlighting the rapid rise of

clean energy, critical minerals, green hydrogen and sustainable manufacturing as sectors of immense opportunity, the PM noted that growing collaboration with Sweden, Norway and Italy in green transition and sustainable technology would position India strongly in the clean manufacturing industries of the future.

"These partnerships are opening the doors of a new economy and new opportunities," he said.

Pointing to accelerated work on ports, shipping and maritime infrastructure agreements, Modi observed that partnerships with the UAE and Norway would fortify India's shipbuilding ecosystem, directly expanding the horizon of opportunity for the country's engineers, technicians and skilled workers.

"New opportunities will be created for India's engineers, technicians and skilled workers," he said.

Noting that each new partnership simultaneously widens global connectivity for Indian startups, researchers and young professionals, the PM reflected on a world today that respects nations which innovate, build, and deliver at scale.

He exuded pride that India is advancing on all three fronts. "The greatest force behind this transformation is India's youth, all of you," he said. (PTI)

## CJP launches campaign seeking Pradhan's resignation

**NEW DELHI, May 23:** Back with the tagline 'Cockroaches Never Die' after its original X handle was withheld in India, the 'Cockroach Janata Party', a satirical social media account, launched a campaign on Friday demanding the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, even as its founder Abhijeet Dipke claimed that his Instagram account had been hacked.

The campaign, spearheaded through the Cockroach Janata Party's (CJP) new X handle, 'Cockroach Is Back', and its Instagram platform, centres on alleged systemic failures in the education sector, particularly concerns surrounding the NEET-UG 2026 'paper-leak' controversy.

CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke urged its followers to support an online petition demanding Pradhan's resignation.

"How are you, cockroaches? Everyone is saying you are doing great on the internet, but I think that now it is time to do some real work. Today, we are starting a petition demanding the resignation of the education minister," Dipke said in a video message.

Calling for accountability, he said the failures in the education system have adversely affected students.

"It is time now to make the system accountable. It was the fault of the system that over 22 lakh students' future was impacted, and it was the fault of the system that NEET students committed suicide. Whatever happens, Dharmendra Pradhan will have to resign," Dipke said.

On May 12, the National Testing Agency (NTA) cancelled the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance

Test (Undergraduate), or NEET, held on May 3 for medical admissions amid allegations of paper leak. The matter is being probed by the CBI, and a re-examination has been scheduled for June 21.

Dipke also claimed to have received threats amid the campaign against Pradhan.

"Receiving death threats now," he said in an X post, sharing screenshots of the threat messages.

The resignation campaign comes a day after the original CJP handle was withheld in India by X, prompting Dipke to launch a new handle - Cockroach is Back - with the tagline

Cockroaches Never Die.

"This was expected since there were attempts to hack the account. But this is a self-goal by the government," Dipke had told PTI, adding that his team would pursue legal remedies.

Late on Friday night, Dipke said on X that his Instagram account had been hacked and that he had lost access to it.

"My Instagram account has been hacked. @Meta, I have lost access to my Instagram account. Trying to recover it but unable to," he said.

In another post, Dipke said the CJP's backup Instagram account had also been "taken down".

According to Dipke, the original CJP handle garnered more than two lakh followers before X withheld it. On Friday night, the Cockroach is Back X handle had more than 1.86 lakh followers.

On Instagram, the CJP crossed 21.3 million followers on Friday night, leaving the BJP, which has around 9.1 million followers on the Meta-owned platform, as well as the Congress, which has around 13.4 million followers, far behind.

The satirical platform surfaced last week following a controversy around remarks attributed to Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant regarding "cockroaches" and "parasites" during a court hearing on the "senior" designation of lawyers.

The CJI later clarified that his observations, directed at individuals entering the legal profession using "fake and bogus degrees", were misquoted.

What began as an online satire project has since evolved into a wider conversation on digital dissent and youth frustration, with the platform using memes and sharp political commentary to address issues, such as unemployment, exam-paper leaks and education. The rapid rise has drawn attention not only from meme creators and young users but also from public figures who view it as a form of digital dissent.

Politicians, including Trinamool Congress leaders Mahua Moitra and Kirti Azad, and Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, have engaged with or expressed interest in the movement alongside activists such as Prashant Bhusan and Anjali Bharadwaj. (PTI)

## Adityanath slams UP Cong chief for anti-PM remarks

**LUCKNOW, May 23:** A purported video of Uttar Pradesh Congress chief Ajay Rai went viral on Friday in which he was heard making "abusive" remarks against Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Mahoba.

Termining the video fake and AI-generated by the BJP, Rai told PTI that he would lodge a police complaint in the matter once he reaches Lucknow.

Slamming Rai for the "abusive" remarks, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath claimed that it is a deep-rooted political culture of the Congress.

In a post on X, Adityanath said, "The indecent, unparliamentary and unforgivable remarks made by the Uttar Pradesh Congress president against respected Prime Minister Narendra Modi exposed the Congress' deep-rooted political culture." Without naming Rahul Gandhi, the chief minister also said that earlier, too, the 'Yuvraj' of the Congress had displayed the same lack of values in his conduct and statements.

"The Congress has now reached the peak of frustration, desperation, negativity and political bankruptcy. It is no longer in a position to seek forgiveness from the people of the country," Adityanath said.

Uttar Pradesh BJP chief and Union minister Pankaj Chaudhary termed Rai's comments "highly condemnable", "unfortunate", and reflective of the "desperate" mindset of the Congress.

In a statement issued by the BJP, Chaudhary said, "The statement constitutes an insult, not merely to the prime minister, but also to the sentiments of the country's 140 crore citizens who view the prime minister as a symbol of development, security, and dignity."

The Congress must understand that while everyone has the right to dissent in a democracy, decorum and civility constitute the very soul of Indian politics, he said. "Personal insults and derogatory remarks will only accelerate the political decline of the Congress," he said.

Chaudhary also demanded that the Congress leadership immediately issue a public apology and instruct its leaders to use restraint and dignified language.

BJP spokesperson Rakesh Tripathi said, "The Congress should be ashamed for using such deplorable language. It has crossed all limits of decency. There is a competition within the Congress to hurl abuses, and it will have to face the consequences." (PTI)

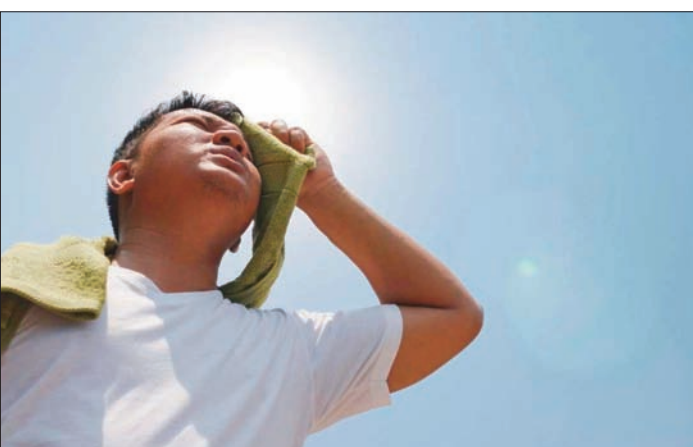
## Heatwave: Taking toll on brain, eye health; doctors advise caution amid soaring temperatures

**NEW DELHI, May 23:** With heatwave conditions intensifying across several parts of the country, doctors are warning that prolonged exposure to high temperatures may adversely affect not only physical well-being but also eye and neurological functioning, especially among children, senior citizens and people with pre-existing medical conditions.

Health experts say soaring temperatures, dehydration and prolonged exposure to sunlight can disturb the body's internal balance and trigger fatigue, dizziness, severe headaches, migraines, heat exhaustion and even neurological complications in vulnerable individuals.

Hospitals across Delhi-NCR are witnessing a rise in patients reporting heat-related ailments, including eye irritation, dehydration-induced headaches and heat-triggered neurological symptoms, doctors said.

"The ongoing heatwave is beginning to show an impact beyond routine heat-related illnesses, with a noticeable increase in neurological complaints in our OPD," Dr Vinit Suri, Senior Consultant-Neurology, Indraprastha Apollo Hospital,



Delhi, said.

"We have seen nearly a 20 per cent increase in OPD patients over the past few days, with more people coming in with symptoms such as severe headaches, dizziness, disorientation, fainting episodes, worsening of existing neurological conditions, and especially migraine flare-ups," he said.

Heat exposure and prolonged exposure to bright sunlight can act as triggers for migraines in some individuals, Dr Suri said. Extreme heat

and dehydration can also affect blood flow to the brain, alter electrolyte balance and place significant stress on the nervous system, particularly in vulnerable individuals, he explained.

Symptoms such as persistent confusion, slurred speech, unusual drowsiness, seizures or loss of consciousness should not be ignored, as they may indicate a serious neurological emergency and require immediate medical attention.

Dr Sushma Sharma, Director,

Neurology, at Marengo Asia Hospitals, said people suffering from migraine, epilepsy and other neurological disorders may face worsening symptoms during periods of extreme heat and poor sleep caused by hot nights and power cuts.

"During extreme summer heat, it is important to avoid stepping out during peak afternoon hours whenever possible. If going outdoors is necessary, people should protect themselves by using umbrellas, sunglasses, and covering their heads. Staying hydrated is equally important because dehydration caused by excessive sweating can also lead to confusion and neurological complications," Dr Sharma said.

She advised people to consume natural electrolyte-rich drinks such as coconut water, buttermilk and fresh fruit juices to compensate for fluid loss caused by excessive sweating. Doctors also cautioned that eye health often gets neglected during summer despite the season significantly increasing the risk of irritation and infections. Dr Neeraj Sanduja, Director at Viaan Eye and Retina Centre, said excessive exposure to sunlight, hot winds, dust and

dehydration commonly lead to eye strain and discomfort.

"Summer heat can affect eye health in several ways. Prolonged exposure to strong sunlight, hot winds, dust and dehydration can lead to dryness, irritation, redness and eye strain."

"Many people also experience burning sensation, itching or watery eyes during this season. We also get cases of dry eye syndrome, allergic conjunctivitis and corneal sunburns. Children and those spending long hours outdoors should be extra careful," Dr Sanduja said.

Dr Namrata Sharma, a professor at the Dr R P Centre for Ophthalmic Sciences, Delhi, said continuous use of air-conditioners and increased screen time indoors are also contributing to eye-related complaints during summer.

"Dry indoor air from air-conditioners, combined with prolonged mobile and laptop use, reduces natural tear production and worsens eye dryness. People often ignore early symptoms such as redness, blurry vision and irritation, which can gradually become more serious if left untreated," she said. (PTI)

# Make people laugh, that's our motto: Varun on taking forward father David Dhawan's legacy

Actor Varun Dhawan on Saturday said his only goal has always been to entertain audiences, a philosophy which he imbibed from his filmmaker father, David Dhawan.

He was speaking at the trailer launch event of his upcoming film "Hai Jawani Toh Ishq Hona Hai", which marks David Dhawan's comeback after a gap of six years.

"It is amazing that this man (father) is actually making a film at this age and at a time when we are questioning cinema. Every Friday, we all question and think, 'if this will work or not.' This is a David Dhawan film and made on his conviction to make you laugh," Varun told reporters here.

"If my family has had one motto, it's been to make people laugh. My father has only one motto that he wants to make people laugh," he said.

David Dhawan, who redefined the mainstream Hindi cinema with hit comedies such as "Raja Babu", "Aankhen", "Coolie No. 1", "Biwi No. 1", and "Partner", said he has consciously made "entertaining" films.

"You keep saying comedy films, I make entertainment films, I don't call it comedy. My Guru has been Manmohan Desai," he said.

"Hai Jawani Toh Ishq Hona Hai" also marks the fourth collaboration between the father and son duo after "Main Tera Hero" (2014), "Jud-

waa 2" (2017), "Coolie No. 1" (2020).

"He has always looked after me, even in the hospital. Every father should have a son like him," the filmmaker said, adding that Varun often argues with him on the sets like any other actor.

According to Varun, working on a David Dhawan film requires one to stay constantly alert.

"As an actor you have to be ready, he can give you any kind of scene, situation. Like, you will think that should I talk in this accent or do this or say this dialogue, so you are always on your toes. You have to be a very good actor to do well in his cinema. And that's why he casts only good actors."

"Hai Jawani Toh Ishq Hona Hai" also stars Mrunal Thakur, Pooja Hegde, Jimmy Shergill, Chunky Panday, Mouni Roy, Rajesh Kumar, and Ali Asgar in pivotal roles.

Pooja said working with David Dhawan taught her to approach comedy with instinct.

"David sir always said, 'Whatever you do, do it with conviction, you guys think a lot today, don't think so much, you have to make people laugh, just do it with full love and conviction.' That's something I really learned from David sir."

Mrunal said working with the veteran director was a "bucket list" experience for her.

"I've only been a part of serious films either like thrillers or something like that but as an actor if I am entering into a comedy genre, a commercial entertainment movie, it has to be a David Dhawan film."

"I wish I would have met him many moons ago so that I would have had a chance to work with him. In my head I was like, 'Please do this three-film deal with me'," she said.

It is the first time that Jimmy is working with David Dhawan and he said he wanted to collaborate with the filmmaker ever since he landed in Mumbai.

"I came to Bombay in 1992 and my dream was to become a good actor. Every month there used to be a blockbuster film by David, I used to think if I get a chance to work with David then it will be good."

"Like, they say you wish for something and it does come true. After 35-36 years (of being in the industry), I'm doing a film with David and it's amazing. I told him about this while shooting for this movie," said the actor, known for his intense roles in films like "Maachis", "Saheb Biwi Aur Gangster", and "Sikandar Ka Muqaddar".

"Hai Jawani Toh Ishq Hona Hai" is set to release in cinemas on June 5. It is produced by Tips Films Ltd, and co-produced by Maximilian Films (UK). (PTI)



## Ravi Kishan says he has no idea why his slip-ups go viral on social media

Actor-politician Ravi Kishan says he has never understood why he keeps going viral on social media and that he is just an ordinary person who makes mistakes like everyone else.

At the trailer launch of his upcoming film "Maa Behen" on Friday evening, Kishan was asked about his most recent slip-up -- the viral video in which he accidentally said "home from work" instead of "work from home" while speaking in support of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's WFH campaign.

"I swear on Mahadev, I've no idea why I keep going viral. I accidentally said 'home from work' and 'jaldi the late'. I was on my way to Parliament and wanted to say I needed to 'work from home', but 'home from work' slipped out instead."

"People look at me as if I've arrived from some completely different planet. I'm just a human being, and I make mistakes like everyone else. Why you guys make me go viral is beyond my understanding," the actor said.

The BJP MP from Gorakhpur also said that his gaffes have even caught the attention of the top leadership of his party.

"Everyone asks me about it, even people in my own political party. My superiors ask, 'What exactly do you do?' I'm like, 'I don't know,'" he said.

"Maa Behen" is a dark comedy in which Kishan stars alongside Madhuri Dixit, Triptii Dimri and influencer Dharna Durgaa. The Netflix film is directed by Suresh Triveni of "Subedar" and "Tumhari Sulu" fame.

It features Dixit as Rekha, a mother who's already juggling enough until life throws her the ultimate curveball: a dead body in her kitchen.

"With her two daughters, Jaya (Dimri), the responsible one, and Sushma (Durgaa), the wild card, this trio must think fast, lie faster, and somehow keep their nosy neighbours from sniffing out the truth," read the official logline.

Just like his viral slip-ups, Kishan said he is confident that "Maa

Behen" will also go viral on social media.

"Earlier, 'Laapataa Ladies' came out on Netflix and made it all the way to the Oscars, and 'Maamla Legal Hai' second season has been trending at the top spot for two months now."

"Now, Madhuri Ma'am, Triptii, Durga, Geetanjali, and everyone else are all such phenomenal actors, and they are coming together for 'Maa Behen'. This film will definitely go viral; it has all the right ingredients for it. Since, I'm in it too, all I have to do is show up and go viral," the 56-year-old actor said.

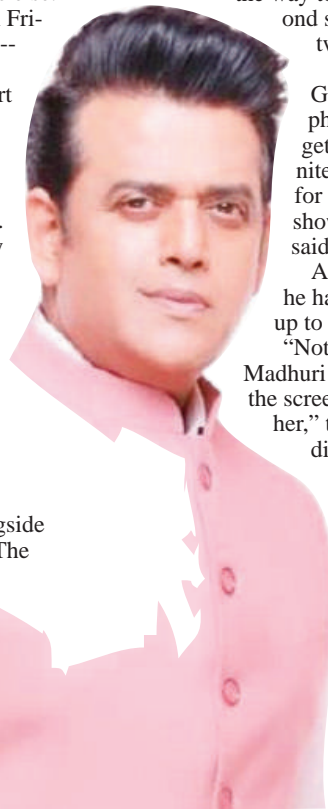
Asked about working with Dixit, Kishan said he has long admired her as an actor and looked up to her commitment towards her work.

"Not just me but the entire world is a fan of Madhuri ma'am, it was a privilege for me to share the screen with her. I've had great fun working with her," the actor said, expressing gratitude to the director and the makers for bringing the cast together.

"She is very punctual. I always tried to reach before time but I would often find her coming before me despite it being a difficult shoot. Like, we faced immense challenges in terms of the weather, there were days when we shot amid heavy rains," he added.

According to Kishan, one of the most striking qualities about Dixit is her mastery over North Indian dialects.

"She has beautifully spoken Kanpuria-Bhojpuri and Gorakhpuria-Bhojpuri, she has worked very hard for that. She is a Maharashtrian, born and raised in Maharashtra but one will feel that she is a Bhojpuri woman." (PTI)



She is a Maharashtrian, born and raised in Maharashtra but one will feel that she is a Bhojpuri woman." (PTI)

## Pritam dismisses plagiarism allegations over 'Cocktail 2' song 'Mashooqa', calls critics 'unpaid PR team'

Music composer Pritam has refuted allegations of plagiarism surrounding "Mashooqa", a song from the upcoming film "Cocktail 2", after social media users claimed its tune was lifted from a 1993 Italian track.

The controversy erupted after a Reddit user shared a comparison video placing "Mashooqa" alongside "Se So Arrubate A Nonna", a Neapolitan song by Italian duo Bibi and Coco from their 1993 album "Le Origini Vol. 2". Many users claimed the two tunes sounded nearly identical.

Pritam responded to critics in a post on his Instagram stories, calling them his "unpaid PR team".

"Every single one of my song releases comes with a set of self-appointed music detectives, who

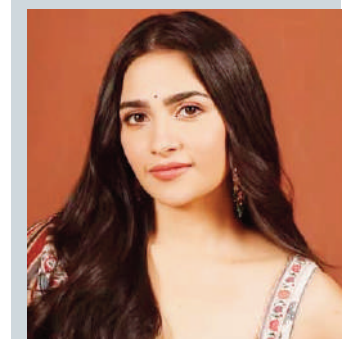
have created a new genre called 'imaginary similarities'. Same people, same 'inspired by' thesis. Boss, at this point, you are my unpaid PR team. I just want to say guys, NOT NICE," he wrote.

The online debate also saw several users revisiting older plagiarism allegations against the composer.

"Mashooqa" has been composed by Pritam with lyrics by Amitabh Bhattacharya. It is sung by Raghav Chaitanya and Mahmood Ruua Kayy, with the Italian portions written and performed by singer Mahmood.

"Cocktail 2", which features Shahid Kapoor, Kriti Sanon and Rashmika Mandanna, is set to be released on June 19. The film is directed by Homi Adajania and produced by Maddock Films and Luv Films. (PTI)

## Rukmini Vasanth calls out fake AI-generated images



Kantara Chapter 1 actor Rukmini Vasanth has become the latest celebrity to be targeted by the dark side of AI, after fake images falsely claiming to feature the actor began circulating online. Condemning the spread of morphed content, the actor has decided to take strict action against those responsible.

On Saturday, Rukmini took to her account on X, formerly known as Twitter, to warn people about the AI-generated content, saying she is planning to initiate necessary legal and cybercrime action.

"My team and I have come across certain AI-generated images being circulated online claiming to be me. I want to state clearly that these images are entirely fake and fabricated. The creation and circulation of such manipulated content is deeply irresponsible and a serious violation of privacy," Rukmini wrote in the note posted on her account.

The actor added, "We are taking this matter seriously and initiating the necessary legal and cybercrime action against those involved in creating and spreading these images. Requesting everyone to refrain from sharing or engaging with such content."

This is not the first time that Rukmini has spoken out against online scams and the misuse of her identity.

Last year, Rukmini took to social media to warn people against a fraudster impersonating her. Rukmini began her note by posting a number and stating that she had been made aware that the person using it was pretending to be her. She wrote, "Important Alert & Awareness Message. It has come to my attention that an individual using the number 9445893273 is impersonating me and reaching out to various people under false pretenses."

She added that action will be taken against the individual, writing, "I want to clarify that this number does not belong to me, and any messages or calls from it are completely fake. Please do not respond or engage with such messages. This act of impersonation falls under cybercrime and appropriate action is being taken against those involved in such fraudulent and misleading activities." (Agencies)

## 'Spider Noir' cast on working with Nicolas Cage: He's full of surprises, raises everyone's game

At 62, Nicolas Cage still carries the aura of a Hollywood movie star -- the nice car, leather jackets and his electric presence. But he completely transforms the moment he steps in front of the camera, according to his co-stars from the upcoming series "Spider-Noir".

Actors Lamorne Morris, Jack Huston and Li Jun Li have different takeaways from working with Cage, yet they all agree that his on-set conduct bears little resemblance to his larger-than-life public image. For Morris, Cage oozes the classic "Nick Cage energy", much like his character of Castor Troy from the 1997 hit "Face/Off".

"You've seen his red carpet photos and you've seen some of the flash. He dresses quite nicely and he'll show up with the coolest leather jacket on and the nicest car you've ever seen. And it's this movie star aura that he carries. His sense of style, it bleeds Nick Cage, almost like Castor Troy in 'Face/Off'. He has that kind of electric energy."

"But the moment he comes out of his trailer, he's so professional and he's all business and he's so kind and caring," Morris told PTI in a roundtable interview.

The Prime Video series marks Cage's first foray into television as well as his debut as a superhero, in a celebrated career that has featured acclaimed performances in films such as "Leaving Las Vegas", "Moonstruck", "Raising Arizona", "The Rock", "Con Air", "National Treasure" and "Ghost Rider". In the series, Cage stars as Ben Reilly, an ageing, down-on-his-luck private investigator in 1930s New York who must confront his past as the city's sole masked vigilante The Spider.

Morris, who essays the role of Reilly's friend Robbie Robertson, said one of the most striking things he observed was Cage's ability to switch gears at will.

"The things that I learned from him is how to go in and out. He can turn it off and then turn it on just like that," said the actor, best known for his Emmy-winning role in season five of " Fargo".

Huston, known for movies and shows such as "Boardwalk Empire", "American Hustle" and "The Irishman", praised Cage as "one of those unique actors who's just surprising at every turn."

In the show, Huston plays the role of Flint Marko aka supervillain Sandman.

"I loved every second of working with Nick. He's the most well prepared. He's the most exciting person to be opposite. He leads by the greatest example, which is absolute love and excitement and somebody who turns up to work and you're just surprised at every turn. He raises everyone else's game," the actor said.

According to Huston, Cage is that actor who just can't be pigeonholed in anything.

"You can never put him in a box. He'll always do something surprising. He'll always do something original. He'll always bring Nick Cage to that specific part of a role which nobody else can touch. It's sort of an amazing thing. It was one of the great experiences of my life working on this opposite someone like Nick," he added.

Li, known for movies such as "Babylon" and "Sinners", said she found Cage to be inspiring as a co-star. She essays the role of Cat Hardy, a femme fatale nightclub singer with ties to an underworld



conspiracy. The actor said she had her own ideas about her character and her scenes but found them upended the moment she started working with Cage.

"I was really excited to work with him... he is so hyper-focused and his excellent work ethic and he works very fast and so specific in his choices. And in the very beginning, before the initial cast table read, we all have our interpretations of how scenes should work and I had a very different idea."

"But when he and I started reading together for the first time, it completely changed how I saw our

dynamic... He's basically inspired me very much and has made me a better actor. He's forced me to live in the moment because of the way he works," she said.

"Spider Noir", which will premiere on Prime Video on May 25, is produced by Sony Pictures Television in association with Amazon MGM Studios. Harry Bradbeer directed and executive produced the first two episodes.

Oren Uziel and Steve Lightfoot serve as co-showrunners and executive producers, alongside Phil Lord, Christopher Miller and Amy Pascal. (PTI)

# Barcelona and OL Lyonnes chase season sweep of trophies in Women's Champions League final

OSLO, May 23: Barcelona and OL Lyonnes are both chasing a season sweep of four major trophies when they meet in the Women's Champions League final Saturday.

The two dominant clubs in European women's soccer over 15 years face each other for the fourth time in the past eight finals.

It is 2-1 in that head-to-head for Lyon which has a record eight European titles, including five straight through 2020, in the competition's 25-year history.

Barcelona is in its seventh final in eight years, its sixth in a row, and is widely favored to win a fourth title.

That era started with a humbling 4-1 loss to Lyon in the 2019 final in Budapest.

"They were much, much better than us. I am humble enough to say that," Barcelona's two-time Ballon d'Or winner Alexia Putellas recalled.

Lyon also won their title clash in 2022 and only in 2024 did Barcelona finally triumph against its biggest rival.

Lyon captain Wendie Renard is set to play in her 12th final of a remarkable career, since scoring in the French giant's first title win in 2011.



The teams are coached by former colleagues at Barcelona. Jonatan Giráldez now coaches Lyon after winning two Women's Champions League titles at Barcelona when Pere Romeu was one of his assistants.

"I feel privileged to face Barcelona as I'm

grateful for the experience I had there and I wish them the best," Giráldez said.

Oslo too small?UEFA's choice of Oslo to host the final has drawn some criticism from Barcelona.

Star player Aitana Bonmati suggested the

28,000-seat Ullevaal Stadium was "a step back" for women's soccer: a stadium too small in a city with too few direct flights.

Norway was defended as "the motherland" of women's soccer in Europe by UEFA's director of women's football, Nadine Kessler. She played in three Champions League finals that each drew crowds of fewer than 20,000.

The Ullevaal is sold out Saturday, while one year ago Sporting Lisbon's stadium was just three-quarters full with nearly 39,000 to watch Arsenal beat Barcelona 1-0.

Norway's established stars — Barcelona's Caroline Graham Hansen and Lyon's Ada Hegerberg — stood up for their national stadium Friday.

"The venue was decided a couple of years ago," said Graham Hansen, who grew up in this neighborhood of Oslo, "and you didn't take it for granted you would sell out the stadium."

The game is "a once in a lifetime" opportunity for Norwegian soccer and to inspire young girls, Hegerberg said.

The 2027 final is in Warsaw at Poland's national stadium, which can hold 56,000 for the biggest games. (AP)

# North Korean team wins Asian Women's Champions League soccer title



SEOUL, May 23: North Korea's Naegohyang FC defeated Tokyo Verdy Beleza 1-0 to win soccer's Asian Women's Champions League on Saturday in the South Korean city of Suwon.

Kim Kyong Yong scored the only goal of the game, her fourth of the tournament, just before half-time.

The North Korean international forward, who also scored the winning goal in the semifinal win over South Korea's Suwon FC on Wednesday, shot home from inside the area after receiving the ball from Kim Jung who broke free of the Japanese defense.

Watched by a sparse crowd at Suwon Sports Complex, just south of Seoul, the team from Pyongyang had more chances than Tokyo in what was a tight game and deserved to win just the second

edition of the 12-team continental tournament, following Wuhan Jiangda's triumph a year earlier.

The triumph continues unprecedented success for North Korea in women's soccer. In 2024, the national team won both the U-20 and U-17 World Cups, and successfully defended the latter in 2025.

At a continental level, North Korea won the 2024 Women's Asian Cup and the 2024 and 2026 U-17 tournament.

"We don't have enough time to explain the evolution of our national football programs," Naegohyang head coach Ri Yu Il said prior to the final.

"We have a specialized player development system. Players are well-trained from a young age and as they grow older, they contribute to good performances at AFC or FIFA competitions." (AP)

# Bhambri and Venus end runners-up in Geneva

GENEVA, May 23: India's Yuki Bhambri and his New Zealand partner Michael Venus finished runners-up at the Geneva Open after suffering a hard-fought defeat in the ATP 250 doubles final here on Saturday.

The third-seeded Indo-Kiwi pair lost 6-3, 6-7(7), 7-10 to Romain Arneodo of Monaco and Australia's Marc Polmans in a closely-contested summit clash that lasted nearly two hours.

Bhambri and Venus, who were playing together in their first final of the 2026 season, took the opening set but the rivals forced a match tie-breaker after taking the second.

Arneodo and Polmans raised their level in the decider, gaining an early advantage and maintaining composure in crucial exchanges to seal the title. Bhambri and Venus had entered the final with impressive momentum after defeating Czech pair Petr Rikl and Adam Pavlasek 7-5, 6-3 in the semifinals.

For Bhambri, the Geneva campaign nevertheless marked an encouraging return to deep ATP Tour runs after a steady season on the doubles circuit. (PTI)

# Talwar hangs inside Top-20 in Denmark

ODENSE (DENMARK), May 23: Indian golfer Saptak Talwar showed signs of taking his good form at home to Europe as he carded 67-70 to easily make the cut at the Danish Challenge Open on the Hotel Planner Tour here.

Talwar, who won one event on the domestic DP World PGTI Tour and leads the Order of Merit, had six birdies against one bogey in his first round and sizzled with six birdies against one bogey on the front nine in the second round.

At that point he was in line to be inside Top-5. He slipped with a double bogey on Par-4 16th and a bogey on the 17th to drop to T-16.

The 27-year-old Talwar played in the afternoon sessions when the wind was much demanding than in the morning wave. Yet he did superbly on the front nine.

Talwar has been focussing on dividing his time between home tour, where he has finished inside Top-15 in all six starts including a win, and the Hotel Planner Tour.

He was Tied-second at the DP World PGTI Open, which was co-sanctioned with Hotel Planner Tour, but missed the cut last two weeks.

Martin Simonsen, Lars van der Vight and Algot Kleen shared the lead at 11 under par at the halfway stage. The trio were all part of the morning wave and were able to capitalise on calmer scoring conditions than round one's high winds.

It was van der Vight who carded the low score of the leaders, a seven under 65 that included six birdies and one eagle.

Simonsen had the only blemish-free round of the leaders, a bogey-free six under par 66 backing up his round one 67. Kleen, a regular member of the Nordic Golf League, got into the field this week through an invite. The Swede is aiming to capitalise on the chance he has created at this higher level.

One shot back of the leaders at 10-under par are the trio of Swede Adam Wallin, Spaniard Javier Barcos Garbayo, and Tapio Pulkkanen of Finland, who shot the round of the week so far, a nine under par 63. (PTI)

# Pranavi in top 10 heading into the final round

RABAT (MOROCCO), May 23: Still searching for her maiden title on the Ladies European Tour, Indian golfer Pranavi Urs carded a second round of 2-under to hold her position in the top 10 of the leaderboard at the Lalla Meryem Cup here.

Tied second after the first round, Pranavi was now T-8 with a total score of 5-under par (70-71) after 36 holes. She is eight strokes behind the leader, Kelsey Bennett.

Bennet continues to lead the field after setting the low score of the week with a card of 8-under 65. She progressed her score to 13-under par (68-65).

Two-time LET winner, Diksha Dagar was the only other Indian in the field to make the cut this week. She is currently in T-28 after carding a round of 3-under 70. Her total score stands at 1-under par (75-70).

The two other Indians in the field at the start of the week were Hitaashree Bakshi (78-72) and Avani Prashanth (75-75). Both of them met an early end to the week as they had a total score of 4-over par each after the second day and the cut was set at 2-over par. Both ended their week in T-73 on the leaderboard.

Pranavi, who was in Top-5 at the Hero Women's Indian Open in 2025, began her second round on the front nine. She was off to a strong start with three birdies in the first five holes before dropping two strokes with bogeys on the fifth and sixth holes.

On the back nine, she made another two birdies on the 13th and 14 holes before dropping a shot with a late bogey on the 17th hole to end the day with a card of 2-under 71.

Diksha started her second round with a par on the first hole before making three consecutive birdies followed by bogeys on the fifth, seventh and ninth holes to be even par at the turn. On the back nine, she picked up strokes on the 11th and 14th holes before picking a late birdie on the closing 18th hole to finish the day at 3-under 70.

Hitaashree shot a round of 1-under 72 on her second day, following her opening round of 5-over 78 while Avani carded a second consecutive round of 2-over 75.

Kelsey Bennett, the 36 hole leader, played a bogey free round with eighth birdies to lead the field by three strokes heading into the weekend. Pia Babnik of Slovenia was the other player



to card a round of 8-under 65 during the second round. She was second on the leaderboard with a total score of 10-under par (71-65). Pia made nine birdies in her second round along with one bogey.

Anna Huang and Anna Zanusso were in T-3 with a total score of 7-under par. Huang recorded a second round of 4-under 69 and Anna Zanusso carded 6-under 67. (PTI)

# Soudal Open: Sandhu makes cut; Sharma misses out



ANTWERP, May 23: Indians had mixed luck as Yuvraj Sandhu (70-68) made the cut, while Shubhankar Sharma (70-72) missed the weekend at the Soudal Open at Rinkven International Golf Club near Antwerp here in Belgium.

Sandhu, playing his first season on the DP World Tour, had four birdies against three bogeys on the first day and was T-72, but his second round of 68 with five birdies against two bogeys saw him rise to T-51 and make the cut.

After a rather slow start to the season when he missed six cuts on the DPWT, Sandhu made the weekend at Turkish Airlines Open

and the Estrella Damm Catalunya Championship.

Both Sandhu and Sharma missed out on the US Open qualifiers, but this week Sandhu has against made the cut showing signs that he is adjusting to Europe.

Sharma in 13 starts this season has made six cuts and missed seven with a best of T-32 in Mauritius.

South Africa's Zander Lombard produced a great finish while France's Tom Vaillant continued his remarkable consistency as the two players shared the halfway lead after the second round.

The 31-year-old, Lombard, who held a one stroke lead after the opening round in Belgium, holed a long-range birdie putt from 31 feet at the last to join the Frenchman at the top of the leaderboard after 36 holes.

It came after Vaillant produced a second consecutive bogey-free round to set the early target, following up an opening 65 with a superb seven-under-par 64. (PTI)

# We'll keep an eye on under-tested middle-order ahead of big games: Vettori

HYDERABAD, May 23: Sunrisers Hyderabad head coach Daniel Vettori said the team will continue to monitor its under-tested middle-order ahead of the IPL playoffs even as he credited the side's explosive top-order and disciplined bowling attack for their impressive campaign this season.

SRH registered a massive 55-run win over Royal Challengers Bengaluru here on Friday to grab the third place in the points table and qualify for the play-offs.

"We played really well. You can't have everything. It was a magnificent game, I thought the guys were incredible. Season's not over yet. Top of the table, missed out a little bit on run rate, but nine wins is a fantastic tournament," Vettori said during the post-match press conference.

The former champions will next compete in the Eliminator on Wednesday.

"We've got a middle order who probably hasn't batted that much during the season, so that's something that we always keep an eye on in the build-up towards these big matches. But the team's been amazing," Vettori continued.

"That top four has been brilliant, and that triumvirate of Ishan, Pat and Shakib in the later half of the season has probably been the real difference for us."

Vettori said managing the fifth and sixth bowling options remained one of the team's biggest tactical challenges.

"It's always about juggling our fifth and sixth bowler. That's a big one for us and we went with Harsh Patel tonight because of the nature of the surface, but we know we've got (Prafal) Hinge and Harsh Dubey."

He praised the bowling attack for complementing the explosive batting unit after SRH recovered from a poor start to the season.

"Those three fast bowlers have been exceptional and we've had contributions from Harsh Dubey, from Shivang, from Nitesh, from Hinge that have allowed us to come back from losing three of our first four games," he said.

"To win eight out of the next 12 is a real credit to them. I think we anticipated our batting unit doing what they did and then for the bowlers to complement them was the reason we're in the position we are now."

Despite the loss, RCB head coach Andy Flower expressed satisfaction over his side finishing at the top of the points table, while admitting that a barrage of slower deliveries from Sunrisers Hyderabad and sloppy fielding proved costly.

SRH posted a daunting 255 for 4 after opting to bat first before restricting RCB to 200 for 4 in 20 overs.

"It is great that we topped the table and we played some really good cricket over the length of the tournament to do that," Flower said. (PTI)

# Super Chess Classic: Praggnanandhaa draws with Vachier-Lagrave



BUCHAREST (ROMANIA), May 23: Indian Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa missed a few winning attempts and was held to a draw by Maxime Vachier-Lagrave of France even as the race for the title tightened at the end of the penultimate round of the Super Chess Classic here.

On what turned out to be another excitement-filled day, the clash between overnight leaders Fabiano Caruana of United States and Vincent Keymer of Germany ended in a draw while world championship challenger Javokhir Sindarov of Uzbekistan scored his second victory on the trot over Dutchman Jordan Van Foreest Friday night.

It was not a day the Dutch GMs would like to remember as Anish Giri went down to lowest ranked Deac Bogdan-Daniel of Romania. Wesley So of United States was the beneficiary of a walkover following the withdrawal of Alireza Firouzja of France earlier in the tournament.

With just the last round remaining, the race for the title has heated up with as many as five players in contention. A play-off seems much on cards as both Keymer and Caruana have five points apiece to share the lead. Sindarov, Wesley and Forest share the third spot on 4.5 points each while Praggnanandhaa is now joint sixth along with Giri and Vachier-Lagrave with each having four points in their bags.

Deac Bogdan-Daniel finished his playing campaign on 3.5 points but will get a walkover in the final round to be on a fifty percent score.

After a second round victory over Sindarov, Praggnanandhaa's hunt for the second win almost came close against Vachier-Lagrave. It was a Grunfeld defense wherein the Indian came up with a surprising seventh move as white that had not been played at the highest level.

The Indian was on top pretty early in the Queen and heavy pieces middle game as black had a fractured pawn structure and one could sense that the game could be over soon. (PTI)



NEW DELHI, May 23: Suryakumar Yadav's future as India's T20 captain could primarily be decided by head coach Gautam Gambhir as the national selection committee is not entirely convinced that he can make it to the team purely as a batter, according to a senior BCCI source.

Suryakumar, who was given the moniker SKY by Gambhir, has been struggling for form for a year now.

Within the BCCI, it is understood that the selection panel is in favour of moving on from him but the Board hierarchy also recognises that the coach-captain equation is integral to the dressing-room environment.

And Gambhir's stated comfort with Suryakumar will make him a key figure in the final call.

For close to a year now, Suryakumar's

place in the side has remained under scrutiny. At the moment, it is understood that all five selectors largely believe that the current T20 captain should be dropped from the XI.

The view has been gaining ground ever since the emotional dust of the T20 World Cup triumph settled. The selectors, it is learnt, began seeing the future of Indian cricket through a wider lens instead of focussing on the glow of a single tournament.

"Initially the selectors thought that IPL would help Suryakumar regain form like last edition when he crossed 700 runs. But strangely there hasn't been any technical course correction in his game.

"Even the rookiest of pacers are just bowling straight hard lengths and he has no answer. Selectors don't see him playing the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics. It is as simple as that," a senior BCCI source told PTI.

The numbers do make for a grim reading. Suryakumar managed only 210 runs from 12 innings at a strike-rate of 148 but, more alarmingly, averaged below 18 — statistics that have sharply contrasted with the aura surrounding one of modern T20 cricket's most inventive batters.

"If someone can't earn his place as a batter, how can he be a leader? Hence it is difficult to retain him but Ajit (Agarkar) and

Gautam need to be on same page," the source said.

And therein lies the intrigue. Gambhir is not known to operate as a ceremonial head coach.

Those familiar with his working style insist that in any set-up he oversees, the final word often rests with him. More importantly, his relationship with Suryakumar has remained exceptionally warm.

This means that if Gambhir chooses to back Suryakumar and veto the move to sack him, the selection committee may be forced to postpone the inevitable.

Successors Meanwhile, the corridors of power in Indian cricket are already buzzing with names of possible successors.

Shreyas Iyer remains a powerful contender, armed with tactical sharpness and a strong personality. But whether he and Gambhir can seamlessly coexist remains a question.

Those within the system haven't forgotten Iyer's quiet disappointment when Kolkata Knight Riders' 2024 IPL triumph was widely projected as Gambhir's victory as mentor.

Then there is Shubman Gill, whose stocks have soared yet again after another prolific IPL season leading Gujarat Titans with authority.

Gill, in fact, was originally viewed by Agarkar and company as the long-term all-format leader before a dip in form ahead of the T20 World Cup derailed those plans.

If Suryakumar exits, Gill's reintegration into the T20 side is a possibility although it comes with its own set of complexities.

The think-tank could comfortably envision Gill at the top, with Sanju Samson at No.3 and Ishan Kishan slotting in at four.

However, the rapid rise of teenage sensation Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, who is believed to be on the fast track with an eye on the 2028 Olympics, adds another fascinating dimension to the succession puzzle.

And finally, there is Tilak Varma, a name quietly gathering momentum in influential circles.

"Don't rule out Tilak if Surya is sacked. There's a reason that Tilak has been made captain for tri-nation A series where selectors would get to see his leadership skills," the source added.

For now, Indian cricket once again stands on the crossroads where form, future planning and power dynamics are intersecting.

And somewhere amid all the whispers, statistics and succession plans, one reality looms large — Suryakumar's fate may ultimately depend on whether Gambhir still believes his captain deserves one final series. (PTI)

# Rajasthan Royals look to seal last IPL playoffs spot in clash against flagging Mumbai Indians

**MUMBAI, May 23:** Rajasthan Royals would look to go full throttle in their bid to seal the last Indian Premier League playoffs spot when they take on a struggling Mumbai Indians here on Sunday.

It will be a test of resilience and fitness for both the teams on a potentially hot and humid Sunday afternoon here, as Mumbai Indians would be determined to sign off with a consolation win, while Rajasthan Royals would be aware that a defeat would take their fate out of their hands.

The Royals – currently placed fourth with 14 points – need to win against Mumbai Indians, which will take them to 16 points, at least one point clear of both Punjab Kings and Kolkata Knight Riders, who are still in the fray. But if RR lose on Sunday, they will hope for both Punjab and Knight Riders to also suffer defeats in their final matches for the Jaipur-based side to have any chance of making the play-offs.

The Royals have lost more than they have won in their last five outings, but they will fancy their chances of a win against MI, knowing the conditions of the venue which has small dimensions.

More than Vaibhav Sooryavanshi's fire-



works at the top, it is Yashasvi Jaiswal who poses the biggest threat to the Mumbai Indians. The India opener, also a local boy, went hammer and tongs against Jasprit Bumrah and Co. in Guwahati, scoring a 32-ball 77,

which sealed the fate of the game in the first half itself.

Jaiswal returns to the venue where he had smacked his maiden IPL century three years ago, having scored his second ton the fol-

lowing year against the same opponent.

But RR will still need more consistency from their skipper Riyan Parag and Dhruv Jurel, who both occupy crucial spots in the batting order but have not necessarily provided the impetus in the middle overs. If Jurel has lacked the punch at times, Parag is searching for consistency.

On current form, RR come across a more dangerous team which will have its tails up knowing they have more players in form, primed to deliver at the time of need.

If it is any consolation, MI's record in the last five matches is similar to the Royals with three losses and two wins, but then the hosts will be determined to play for pride and the badge.

The contest will provide MI's struggling Indian stars Suryakumar Yadav, Hardik Pandya and Tilak Varma the chance to have one final crack with an impactful performance which would help their team sign off on a positive note. For Bumrah in particular, the end of the campaign will also bring a much-needed break as the Indian pace attack spearhead would want to put his feet up after an exhausting six months of white ball cricket. (PTI)

# KKR, DC look for nothing less than a win amid fading playoff hopes



**KOLKATA, May 23:** Kolkata Knight Riders and Delhi Capitals would look for nothing less than a win when they square off in the season's final league match of the IPL here on Sunday.

As things stand, sixth-placed KKR and eighth-placed DC are still mathematically alive in the race for the last available berth in the play-offs, but Sunday's contest could well turn out to be a dead rubber by the time it begins.

Punjab Kings, currently ahead in the race for the last playoff berth, take on already-eliminated Lucknow Super Giants on Saturday. A PBKS win would take them to 15 points and officially end Delhi's hopes as they can only reach up to a maximum of 14 points.

KKR, who are on 13 points, can still get to 15 with a win over DC, but Punjab hold a significant net run-rate advantage.

For perspective, even if PBKS beat LSG by just one run, KKR would need to defeat DC by at least 52 runs to overhaul them on NRR. Only an LSG win can keep this contest at Eden Gardens alive heading into Sunday.

Even then, KKR and DC would need Mumbai Indians to beat Rajasthan Royals in the afternoon game. Rajasthan, currently on 14 points, can seal the last available playoff berth by moving to 16.

With so many permutations beyond their control, both teams are likely to focus more on ending the season strongly rather than getting consumed by qualification scenar-

ios. KKR's campaign was severely disrupted early on by injuries and unavailability in their bowling unit.

Mustafizur Rahman, Harshit Rana, Akash Deep and Matheesha Pathirana all missed games due to various issues, while marquee signing Cameron Green, returning from injury, could not bowl in the initial stages. "It was unexpected, unfamiliar territory," KKR CEO Venky Mysore said during an event recently.

But KKR staged a remarkable recovery, winning six of their last seven games to stay in contention.

"Massive credit to the team. Everybody stepped up, embraced each other and pushed forward. Fingers crossed for the last game of the season," Mysore added.

**No Raghuvanshi**

The hosts will be without their leading run-scorer Angkrish Raghuvanshi, who has amassed 422 runs with five fifties this season.

KKR are also expected to take a late call on mystery spinner Varun Chakravarthy depending on how results unfold before the match.

Varun has struggled since suffering a hairline fracture on his left foot during their match against DC on May 8.

**DC's over-reliance on Rahul**

For Delhi Capitals, it has largely been a season of missed opportunities. Their batting has depended heavily on KL Rahul, who has scored 533 runs in 13 innings at a strike rate of over 171, including a century and four fifties. (PTI)

## 'Kohli enjoys aggressive Australian-style'

**NEW DELHI, May 23:** Former India all-rounder Irfan Pathan downplayed the heated on-field exchange between Virat Kohli and Travis Head during Royal Challengers Bengaluru's IPL clash against Sunrisers Hyderabad, saying such confrontations are a natural by-product of the intensity and competitiveness of top-level cricket.

Kohli and Head were involved in an on-field exchange with the former appearing to mock the Australian batter's frequent use by his team as an Impact Substitute by gesturing and telling him to bowl a few deliveries instead of staying off the field. Kohli, however, was dismissed soon after for 15 off 11 balls, prompting Head to fire back with a sledge of his own. The tension appeared to linger after SRH's commanding 55-run win as Head tried to shake hands during the customary post-match greetings, but Kohli walked past him without acknowledging the gesture. (PTI)

## No doubts about Sooryavanshi fitness, says Penney

**MUMBAI, May 23:** For someone who is on the cusp of breaking Chris Gayle's record of most sixes in an IPL season, Vaibhav Sooryavanshi does not really need to do a lot of running between the wickets and there are no doubts about his fitness, RR Assistant coach Trevor Penney said Saturday. The 15-year-old Sooryavanshi has so far hit 53 sixes in this year's IPL so far and is only six hits away from breaking Gayle's record of 59 sixes in an edition.

"(Sooryavanshi's) running between the wickets, (is) very good. But he doesn't really have to run between the wickets too much, does he? It's just about to break Chris Gayle's record for sixes," Penney told reporters here on the eve of RR's contest against Mumbai Indians.

Penney said there are no doubts about Sooryavanshi's skills on the field and in order to keep him fresh for batting, he has been kept out of fielding work during matches.

"He is a very good fielder. He has got great hands. He moves well, he dives, he anticipates, he has got all that. It's just the way it has worked out and sometimes with him opening the batting, him going in and (in) the second innings being



fresh."

"It has worked for us, so there's no specific reason of 'why, oh, he's a bad fielder, we're not playing in the field'. It has nothing to do with that. It's just circumstances," the former India fielding coach added.

Penney said Sooryavanshi has mostly been quiet around the team but is well looked after. "We don't really have to talk to him too much,

he's just in his little bubble. He practices hard and then when he goes out to play, he just enjoys himself," Penney said.

"It's pretty rare that I've ever seen that (kind of talent) — I've been in cricket for 40 years and I haven't seen that before — so long may that last. We've got a really good team, managerial staff (and) support staff that are looking after him. He is very young and the nights are long and that sort of stuff, so we look after him in the evenings," Penney continued. "... (we) make sure he practices accordingly and look after all those small things which you have to do with a young boy. But he's pretty freaky in a way, how he's dealing with it all."

Penney said RR will continue to wait on the availability of their skipper Riyan Parag and Ravindra Jadeja who are dealing with niggles.

"We're going to test today, practice to see if we can pick them for tomorrow (Sunday). I can't say much more than that; (I am) not really on the selection panel. But they're looking good. (In the) last game, (they) didn't play and we won. So if they're not available, I'm sure it's such a good squad," he said. (PTI)



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011-23013690

1800-112-448

careerinaf@gmail.com

DISHA, Air Headquarters (Vayu Bhawan) Motilal Nehru Marg, New Delhi - 110106

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