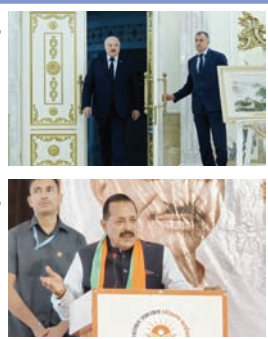


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## Ban polygamy, registration live-in ties sought Uniform Civil Code Bill introduced in Assam assembly

**GUWAHATI, May 25:** The Assam government on Monday tabled a Bill on the Uniform Civil Code, seeking to ban polygamy and make registration of live-in relationships compulsory.

The Bill, however, said that it will not be applicable to any of the Scheduled Tribes residing in Assam. It proposed several punitive measures, including seven years imprisonment for bigamy or polygamy, and three months in jail for not registering a live-in relationship.

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Atul Bora tabled 'The Uniform Civil Code, Assam, 2026 Bill' in the first assembly session of the third BJP-led NDA government, on behalf of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

The opposition parties, including Congress, Rajiour Dal and Trinamool Congress, opposed the move and demanded wider consultation with all stakeholders before



its introduction.

The Assam UCC, a contentious and polarising issue that was part of BJP's election manifesto, is likely to come up for discussion on Wednesday, the last day of the ongoing five-day session.

"The Bill aims to consolidate and simplify laws governing marriage, divorce, succession, and

live-in relationships," Sarma said in its 'Statement of Object and Reasons'.

For marriage, the Bill sets 21 years and 18 years as minimum age for men and women, respectively, and prohibits polygamy, he said.

"Importantly, it protects Assam's cultural diversity by allowing mar-

riages to be performed according to existing religious and customary rites," Sarma said.

To safeguard legal rights, the Bill proposes to make marriage and divorce registration compulsory, which will be vital for securing maintenance, inheritance and other legal protection for spouses.

"For the first time, the Bill provides a legal framework for live-in relationships. By requiring registration, the law ensures that the rights of partners – and any children born from such unions – are formally recognised and protected," the CM said.

He said that the UCC aims to modernise succession laws to ensure a fair and equal distribution of property.

"It introduces uniform rules for inheritance, ensuring that the transfer of assets is handled justly for all residents of the state," Sarma stated.

In terms of succession, the Bill (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## State's economy showed moderate growth: Report CAG report for 2024-25 fiscal tabled in Assam Assembly

**GUWAHATI, May 25:** The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) on Monday raised concern over the fiscal sustainability of the Assam government in its report for the 2024-25 fiscal, pointing at the increasing debt load, high committed expenditure and limited capital investment in the state.

In the report on state finances for 2024-25 tabled in the Assembly, the CAG also said that the delay in submission of utilisation certificates, pending accounts of departmental undertakings and autonomous bodies, is affecting financial reporting.

It said the state's economy showed moderate growth during the 2024-25 fiscal year, with Gross State Domestic Product registering a growth of 13.07 per cent as against the 2023-24 financial year.

The state contributed 1.95 per cent to the country's GDP, with the figure on an increasing trend over the past five years.

During 2024-25, the state's revenue receipts grew by 5.87 per cent, driven primarily by growth in the state's share in union taxes and duties, higher tax collections, notably under SGST.

However, non-tax revenue of the state declined by 9.34 per cent, and grants from the Centre also decreased during the period, the CAG report said.

The state's expenditure was dominated by a moderate growth of revenue spending (6.10 per cent).

The CAG report said that during the previous five years, despite increasing pressure from committed expenditure, the state was able to maintain a consistent level of fiscal flexibility, though with limited scope for expansion in discretionary and developmental expenditures.

Capital expenditure during the previous five years remained "volatile and below budgeted levels (except for 2021-22), reflecting constraints in infrastructure investment", the report said.

Subsidies during 2024-25 increased sharply (124.63 per cent), mainly due to power subsidies, the CAG noted.

"As a result, the state was not able to arrest the revenue and fiscal deficits within the target levels of the State FRBM Act, thereby rendering little room for fiscal consolidation," the report said.

"Though outstanding liabilities remained within the numerical targets, this needs to be seen in the context of growing outstanding off-budget borrowings and contingent liabilities through guarantees," it added.

The increasing debt load, high committed expenditure and limited capital investment raise concerns about fiscal sustainability, the report said, stressing revenue augmentation, better expenditure control and structural reforms to ensure long-term fiscal health.

The CAG said transparency (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## 179 out of 300 tourists stranded mid-air in JK

**SRINAGAR, May 25:** Around 300 tourists in 65 cabins were stranded mid-air for hours after the cable car system developed technical problems in Jammu and Kashmir's Gulmarg on Monday, with rescue operations hampered by heavy rain.

A major multi-agency rescue operation was launched soon after the system malfunctioned around noon, and 179 tourists were evacuated safely in the first five hours, officials said, adding that some of the cabins were nearly 500 ft above ground.

Heavy rains in the area have also been hampering rescue operations, they said.

Operations of both phases of the Gulmarg cable car service, popularly known as the Gondola, were suspended following a malfunction, they said. No casualties were reported.

Personnel of the State Disaster Response Force (SDRF) and the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) along with police and the Army were involved in the rescue effort.

Restoration work on the cable car system is currently underway, the officials said.

Chief Minister Omar Abdullah said the government is "closely monitoring" the situation.

"All cabins are intact and rescue operations to safely evacuate stranded tourists are underway with trained teams on the ground. The situation is completely under control and there is no cause for panic," the chief minister said in a post on X.

The officials said that some of the cabins were hanging at a height of around 500 ft, so evacuating the passengers from these cabins was taking time.

"Passengers have been taken out from around 60 per cent of the cabins so far," an official said.

Jammu and Kashmir Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha said he had directed DGP Nalin Prabhakar to proceed to Gulmarg to oversee the rescue operation.

"I'm monitoring the rescue operation for tourists stranded in cable (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Assam govt moves resolution for one-third quota for women in parl, legislatures



**GUWAHATI, May 25:** The Assam government on Monday moved a resolution in the assembly for implementation of one-third reservation for women in Parliament and state legislatures, after completing the delimitation process.

Women and Child Welfare Minister Ajanta Neog, moving the resolution on the third day of the first session of the new assembly, urged

the unanimous support of the House for the reservation.

"In order to honour women's power and ensure the holistic development and empowerment of women, one-third reservation for women in the Parliament of the country and in all Legislative Assemblies should be implemented with immediate effect, after completing the process of delimitation," the (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Tuliram raises autonomous state issue in Assembly

HT Bureau

**DIPHU, May 25:** Tuliram Ronghang on Monday strongly raised the long-pending demand for an Autonomous State under Article 244(A) of the Constitution during the third day of the first session of the 16th Assam Legislative Assembly.

Ronghang, who is also the Chief Executive Member (CEM) of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), said the people of Karbi Anglong, West Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts have been demanding an Autonomous State for the last 40 years.

He clarified that the demand was not for separation from Assam, but for a "state within a state", with the hill districts continuing to remain part of Assam.

Highlighting the geographical significance of the region, Ronghang pointed out that Karbi Anglong's area of 10,434 square kilometres is larger than states like Sikkim, Goa and Tripura.

Referring to a past meeting at the PWD Guest House in Guwahati, Ronghang reminded Assembly Speaker Ranjeet Kumar Dass that when he was BJP state president, a resolution supporting the Autonomous State demand had been adopted without objection, along with an assurance to raise the matter before the State and Central governments. Ronghang further stated that the prolonged movement over the issue had led to the emergence of 10 insurgent groups and claimed that over 500 people lost their lives during the agitation.

He alleged that the previous Congress government



had failed to provide compensation to affected families, while the present BJP government under Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma provided ₹5 lakh each to families of deceased cadres.

He also referred to the peace accord signed between insurgent groups and the Centre under the leadership of Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, expressing confidence that the present BJP government would ultimately resolve the political issue.

Ronghang additionally praised the Chief Minister's initiative allowing MLAs to take oath in their mother tongues on May 21, describing it as a historic step towards recognising and promoting the languages of various indigenous communities and tribes in the state.

## Suspected ULFA(I) cadre injured in police operation at Bogidoul

HT Correspondent

**SIVASAGAR, May 25:** A suspected cadre of United Liberation Front of Asom (Independent) [ULFA(I)] was seriously injured during a police operation near a deserted ONGC oil rig site at Bogidoul Molaigaon in Sivasagar district on Monday, while five others managed to flee from the spot.

According to Papori Chetia, Sivasagar Police had received information that extortion notices had allegedly been served to businessman Lachit Gogoi of Jaysagar, following which a search operation was launched in the area.

Police said six motorcycle-borne suspected ULFA(I) members reached the site to collect the extortion money and allegedly opened fire after spotting armed plainclothes police personnel deployed there.

In retaliation, police fired several rounds.

During the exchange of fire, one suspected (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## State-level conference held to review preparedness for Phase-I of Census 2027

Assam to conduct digital Houselisting and Housing Census from August 17



HT Bureau

**GUWAHATI, May 25:** A State-level conference of Principal Census Officers (PCOs) in connection with Phase-I of Census 2027, namely the Houselisting and Housing Census (HLO), was held at the Assam Administrative Staff College in Guwahati under the chairmanship of Assam Chief Secretary Ravi Kota.

The conference was organised by the General Administration Department, the nodal department for Census under the Government of Assam, in association with the Directorate of Census Operations, Assam under the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

The meeting was attended by Mrityunjay Kumar Narayan, senior officials of the Assam government, district commissioners, municipal commissioners and officers from the Directorate of Census Operations, Assam.

Officials informed that Census 2027 would be India's first digital census and would be conducted in two phases — Houselisting and Housing Census (HLO) and Population Enumeration (PE).

Phase-I will focus on collecting information relating to houses, households, housing conditions, amenities and assets possessed by households. The conference was informed that the (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Sitharaman defends PM's austerity call; hits out at critics for peddling pessimism

**MUMBAI, May 25:** Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Monday defended Prime Minister Narendra Modi's austerity call, stressing the need to focus on the "3Fs" — fuel, fertiliser and forex — amid the West Asia crisis.

Speaking at the 37th foundation day event of Sidhi here, she also hit out against naysayers who have built a cynical and pessimistic narrative after the Prime Minister's appeal and underlined that India cannot afford fear-mongering at this stage.

The crisis is borne by external events, and the domestic economy continues to be positive and resilient, the finance minister said.

Naysayers have created a "cynical and pessimistic narrative" after the Prime Minister's appeal for austerity, she said, stressing that



such observations are factually incorrect.

"It (the narrative) is wrong because it is fear-mongering. India cannot afford fear-mongering. We need to give confidence to the people with our words and with our actions," she said.

Fuel prices are high, gold prices have climbed to elevated levels, creating concerns on the external front, and there is an "unimaginable increase" in the fertiliser

prices, she said, contextualising the call made by the Prime Minister.

Therefore, there is a need to look at conserving the forex, she said, adding that there is a need to focus on the 3Fs of fuel, fertilisers and forex in the current context.

Stating that India's policy response has been calibrated to preserve domestic growth, Sitharaman said the cut in diesel and petrol excise duties will lead to a revenue impact of ₹1 lakh crore.

Some "naysayers" have jumped into the debate following the Prime Minister's appeal, claiming that everything is "crumbling", which is factually incorrect, she said, listing out a slew of indicators showing buoyancy in the economy, including GST collections and automobile sales. "All the good that is being (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Bhutan PM arrives in Assam, meets Guv Governor Acharya and CM Sarma hold discussions with Bhutan PM Tobgay



**GUWAHATI, May 25:** Bhutan Prime Minister Dasho Tshering Tobgay met Assam governor and chief minister on Monday, and discussed with them ways to enhance cooperation with India's northeastern region.

Tobgay, who arrived in Assam earlier in the day, called on Governor Lakshman Prasad Acharya at the Lok Bhavan. There, he held a meeting with the governor and Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

"The meeting saw elaborate discussions on a wide range of issues on strengthening bilateral ties and enhancing cooperation in the larger interest of the northeast region, with a particular focus on Assam," the

statement said.

A cultural evening, showcasing the heritage and hospitality of Assam, was also organised in honour of the visiting dignitary.

Sarma, in a post on X, said Assam was playing a pivotal role in strengthening the relations between India and Bhutan.

"Honoured to welcome and call on Hon'ble Prime Minister of Bhutan, H.E @tsheringtobgay in Guwahati. Bharat and Bhutan share a very special civilisational relationship, and under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"Assam is playing a pivotal role in strengthening this relationship, which will define the growth of the South Asian region in the 21st century," he said.

Earlier in the day, state Cabinet minister Atul Bora received the Bhutan prime minister at the state guest house here and later said that he expected the visit would open new avenues of goodwill, cooperation and cultural exchange between Assam and Bhutan.

"I had the honour of according a warm and heartfelt welcome to Hon'ble Prime Minister of Bhutan, His Excellency Dasho Tshering Tobgay, at State Guest House Number One, Koinadhora, Guwahati," Bora said in a post on X.

He said that under Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, Assam continues (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Information ops, perception management have taken centre stage in modern warfare: Fmr COAS

**PUNE, May 25:** Former Army chief Manoj Pande on Monday said the nature of warfare has undergone a major transformation with information operations, perception management and narrative building having taken centre stage in the overall national security framework.

In the chaos caused by the rise of deepfakes, bot networks, manufactured narratives, collective propaganda and digitally amplified misinformation, it becomes difficult to determine who is winning and who is losing, the former Chief of Army Staff said.

Delivering the J S Karandikar Memorial Lecture organised by Pune Union of Working Journalists on the topic 'National Security and Role of Media', General Pande (retired) asserted national security is no longer limited to dealing with external threats or



tackling internal security challenges such as terrorism and insurgency.

"When we speak about a developed India, we imagine a secure, organised and stable nation. How-

ever, the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape, disputed and unsettled borders, internal security concerns and several emerging forms of security challenges have made the situation far more com-

plex," he said.

"The character of warfare has changed significantly, with traditional warfare now being accompanied by hybrid and non-contact warfare. Wars today are not fought only on the borders. They are also fought in the domains of information, perception management, narrative building, cyber warfare and space," he said.

The armed forces must remain prepared for these evolving challenges, he said.

Stressing that information operations have assumed unprecedented importance in modern warfare, Pande said military planners, earlier did not pay much attention to it.

"Today, it has taken centre stage because perception shapes international opinion. While earlier the focus was largely confined to one's own (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

# Petrol tops ₹ 100 across most cities, diesel nears ₹ 100 as prices raised for fourth time

**NEW DELHI, May 25:** Petrol prices were raised by ₹ 2.61 a litre and diesel by ₹ 2.71 on Monday, the fourth increase in less than two weeks that extended a delayed pass-through of soaring global crude oil costs triggered by the Iran conflict.

The latest increase took cumulative hikes since May 15 to nearly ₹ 7.5 per litre.

In Delhi, petrol prices rose to ₹ 102.12 per litre from ₹ 99.51, while diesel climbed to ₹ 95.20 from ₹ 92.49, according to industry sources.

Fuel prices have now reached their highest levels since May 2022 after remaining largely frozen for more than two years, barring a ₹ 2-per-litre cut in March 2024 ahead of national elections.

The hike came as global oil prices fell sharply amid tentative hopes for a deal to end the US-Israel war on Iran. Brent crude, the primary benchmark for global oil prices, fell more than 5 per cent after the US and Iran agreed in principle to reopen the Strait of Hormuz.

Global crude oil prices had surged more than 50 per cent since late February following US-Israeli strikes on Iran and disruptions to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, a key global oil transit route.

State-run retailers had delayed passing on higher input costs for weeks, a move the government said was intended to shield consumers from inflation. Opposition parties, however, accused the administration of holding back price increases 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.

Since the start of war, domestic cooking gas LPG prices have been raised by ₹ 60 per 14.2-kg cylinder



and that of compressed natural gas (CNG) by ₹ 4 per kg since mid-May.

Despite the price increases, auto fuels petrol and diesel, and domestic cooking gas LPG continue to be sold at a substantial loss. Besides the three fuel, state-owned fuel retailers -- Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL), and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) -- have paused increase in jet fuel (ATF) rates.

The three firms together control 90 per cent of India's fuel market.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi attacked Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the latest fuel hike, accusing the government of burdening consumers after state elections ended.

"Petrol and diesel prices are being increased in instalments so that people's pockets are quietly picked," Gandhi said in a post on social media, calling Modi "Mahangai Manav Modi" -- a play on words linking the prime minister to inflation.

"Mahangai Manav Modi strikes again," he said in the post. "For months, I had been warning of an impending economic storm. But Modi Ji, true to form, was busy with elections at the time and the moment the elections ended, he hiked the prices of petrol and

diesel by ₹ 8."

And, this upward trend will only continue, he added. "Mahangai manav" Modi has just one job: promises during elections, and attacking people's pockets at other times," Gandhi said.

Retail fuel prices were first raised by ₹ 3 per litre on May 15, followed by a 90-paise increase on May 19 and another hike on May 23, when petrol prices rose by 87 paise and diesel by 91 paise per litre. Prices vary across states due to local levies.

After Monday's increase, petrol in Mumbai was priced at ₹ 111.21 per litre and diesel at ₹ 97.83, while Kolkata rates rose to ₹ 113.51 and ₹ 99.82, respectively. In Chennai, petrol cost ₹ 107.77 and diesel ₹ 99.55 per litre.

Private fuel retailers also moved prices higher alongside state-owned firms. Nayara Energy had earlier increased petrol and diesel prices by ₹ 5 and ₹ 3 per litre, respectively, in March, while Shell plc raised petrol prices by ₹ 7.41 and diesel by as much as ₹ 25 per litre from April 1.

Jio-bp, the fuel retailing joint venture between Reliance Industries Ltd and BP Plc, adjusted pump prices in line with state-run retailers.

The back-to-back increases are expected to add to inflationary

pressures and raise transportation and logistics costs across the economy.

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.

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.

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

Prashant Vasisht, Senior Vice President and Co-Group Head, Corporate Ratings, ICRA Ltd, said, "Despite the latest hike in retail prices of auto fuels, oil marketing companies' under-recoveries remain stubbornly high due to increasing losses in domestic LPG sales and a high premium to the crude market."

ICRA estimated that at crude price of USD 120-125 per barrel and considering past 10-year average crack spreads of auto fuels, oil marketing companies are incurring a loss of about ₹ 700-800 crore daily on the sale of auto fuels and domestic LPG, even after factoring the fuel price hike. "This high level of under recoveries is unsustainable," (PTI)

## Oil companies' losses down to ₹ 600 cr per day



**NEW DELHI, May 25:** The four rounds of petrol and diesel price hike, totalling about ₹ 7.5 per litre, have trimmed the losses state-owned oil firms were incurring from selling fuel below cost to close to ₹ 600 crore per day, Sujata Sharma, Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, said on Monday.

The losses on sale of petrol, diesel and domestic cooking gas LPG were about ₹ 1,000 crore per day before the start of the May 15 cycle of price revision.

"It (losses) is slightly less than ₹ 600 crore per day," she said.

These losses include those from the sale of domestic LPG as well. LPG sold to domestic households is a subsidised product, and the difference between the cost and retail selling price is made good by the government.

Petrol and diesel, on the other hand, are deregulated products whose pricing is market-determined. The losses on these products accumulated after state-owned oil companies kept retail rates frozen despite the war in Iran pushing up input crude oil prices by over 50 per cent. (PTI)

is done at the earliest."

Also, state governments' help is being sought to check hoarding and mismanagement.

She said the government had conducted a video conference with officials from all states and union territories, asking them to monitor local supply situations and prevent hoarding or mismanagement.

Despite disruptions to global energy flows from the West Asia conflict, Sharma said India had sufficient stocks of petrol, diesel and LPG, and that all efforts were being made to ensure uninterrupted fuel supplies nationwide.

The official said the crisis had affected about 40 per cent of India's crude oil imports, 90 per cent of LPG imports and 65 per cent of natural gas imports.

While crude oil (raw material for making fuels like petrol and diesel) is being sourced from alternative sources, LPG production at refineries has been ramped up to around 50,000 tonnes per day to support domestic availability.

The ministry said the panic buying was driven partly by higher agricultural demand, bulk purchases and consumers shifting from private fuel retailers to state-run outlets due to price differences. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

## Uniform Civil Code

proposed to create a uniform, gender-equal order of preference for intestate inheritance among Class-1 heirs, which equitably includes the spouse, children, and parents of the deceased.

For testamentary succession, any adult of sound mind will be granted the legal right to execute a written and witnessed Will. It also proposed to establish necessary administrative machinery, including the appointment of registrars, to implement the reforms. "This ensures that the code is not just a policy, but a practical tool for social justice and equality in Assam," Sharma said. He said that the Constitution, under Article 44, directs the state to strive for a Uniform Civil Code for its citizens. "This Bill seeks to implement this principle within Assam to ensure a common legal framework for all residents, regardless of their religion," the chief minister said. By creating a uniform system, the code ensures legal clarity and protects the fundamental rights of every individual, he said.

According to a note on the UCC Bill, shared by the Director of Information and Public Relations, the proposed law will repeal the Assam Compulsory Registration of Muslim Marriages and Divorces Act, 2024, to streamline the state's statutory architecture. "However, an essential savings clause is included to ensure that any polygamous marriage solemnised prior to the enforcement of this UCC will be regularised and legally protected," it said. The Bill proposed a series of penal provisions for violations of the clauses related to exploitation, fraud and unlawful practices in personal relationships.

Under the proposed law, bigamy and polygamy shall invite imprisonment up to seven years under Section 82 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023. Child marriage and marriage without valid consent shall attract imprisonment up to two years or fine or both as per the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006.

Fraudulent or deceptive marriages through force, coercion or concealment shall be punishable with imprisonment up to seven years along with fine.

Violation of lawful divorce procedure and illegal dissolution of marriage shall invite imprisonment up to three years and fine, while compelling a divorced person to fulfil unlawful conditions before remarriage shall attract three years imprisonment and a penalty of ₹ 1 lakh. Marriage within prohibited relationships, unless protected by valid customs, shall be punishable with imprisonment up to six months and fine up to ₹ 50,000.

Further, deliberate non-registration of marriage or divorce within 60 days shall attract a penalty of ₹ 10,000. Submission of forged or fabricated documents during registration shall invite imprisonment up to three months or fine up to ₹ 25,000 or both.

Similarly, failure to register a live-in relationship within one month shall attract imprisonment up to three months or fine up to ₹ 10,000, while concealment of material facts or furnishing false information in such declarations shall invite imprisonment up to three months and fine up to ₹ 25,000. (PTI)

## State's economy showed

should be enhanced in off-budget borrowings, ensuring timely accounting and reports, and steps should be taken for more judicious budget provisioning. (PTI)

## Suspected ULFA(I)

militant, identified as Ritu Gogoi, sustained bullet injuries below the waist and was captured, while another suspected militant also reportedly suffered gunshot injuries but escaped along with four others.

The injured suspect was rushed to Assam Medical College (AMC), Dibrugarh, for treatment. Police said search operations were continuing to trace the remaining militants.

## Sitharaman defends PM's

done by the common people themselves is forgotten. And a pessimistic, cynical narrative is generated, which is just not right," she said. "We should appreciate that the challenges are more externally driven. We must also recognise that India's domestic economic situation remains positive and resilient even today," the finance minister said. She also highlighted that the issue of ₹ 8.1 lakh crore locked in delayed payments for MSMEs is impacting their working capital and growth, and urged public sector undertakings not to exceed the 45-day window to make payments to them. Meanwhile, Sitharaman also asked lenders to relook at the design of loans to tailor-make products, where repayments happen when an entity gets its revenues.

"My message to Sidbi and every banker here is that standard products cannot serve non-standard businesses," she said, citing examples of how the income generations of businesses vary across multiple activities.

At present, loans are typically given on a monthly repayment basis, which may be weekly as well in the case of microfinance.

"A farmer-linked enterprise does not earn every month. A resort does not earn evenly through the year. A garment exporter waits for payment after shipment. A small auto-comp supplier waits for invoice clearance. A woman entrepreneur may have regular transactions yet no property in her name," Sitharaman said.

"Why should all of them be given the same repayment structure?" the finance minister questioned, asking Sidbi to take the lead to ensure that credit is designed around the business cycle of an enterprise.

Sitharaman also asked Sidbi to expand into a market maker and a risk-sharing partner for small enterprises, and not just be a lender for such companies.

She also urged the body to take care of the debt capital requirements of startups.

There can be a far-reaching economic impact of supporting MSMEs, she said, adding that 32 crore Indians are employed in MSMEs. "If we get the MSME credit right, we get the Middle Class right. If we get the Middle Class right, we get Viksit Bharat right. It is that direct. Don't think that we can do banking the way we want and think all of them are disconnected," she said. (PTI)

## Assam govt moves

resolution stated. Emphasising that women enjoy special respect in the country, the minister said political and social goodwill are needed to ensure further empowerment of them.

"Women are not politically empowered enough. And it is not just in our country, but also globally. There are various reasons for it, including social and educational ones," Neog said.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi ji has assured us that he will ensure women get their due. As a woman, I seek unanimous support for this resolution. Assemblies of several NDA-ruled states have already adopted similar resolutions," Neog, the longest-serving woman MLA in the state, who was elected for the fifth time this year, said. (PTI)

## 179 out of 300 tourists

car cabins following a technical fault in Gulmarg. I have directed the DGP to proceed to the site. Joint rescue teams of Police, Army & SDRF along with DC and SSP are conducting the operation to ensure the safety of all tourists," Sinha posted on X. The Army said in a post on X that swift and coordinated rescue efforts were launched with the assistance of the Chinara Corps.

On June 25, 2017, the Gulmarg Gondola had witnessed an accident when seven people were killed after a tree uprooted by strong winds struck a cabin, causing it to crash to the ground.

The cable car had also been temporarily suspended in January last year because of technical issues.

Monday's incident comes a day after a 16-year-old boy died in Agra after a zipline cable snapped at an amusement facility here, causing him to fall nearly 45 ft. (PTI)

## State-level conference

Government of Assam has notified the Phase-1 Census schedule from August 17 to September 15, 2026.

Self-enumeration facilities will be available from August 2 to August 16, 2026 through the official portal.

House-to-house operations will thereafter be conducted by trained enumerators using digital devices for verification and data collection. Population Enumeration in Assam is scheduled to be conducted in February 2027, with the reference date fixed at 00:00 hours on March 1, 2027. The conference also reviewed preparedness relating to field operations, digital infrastructure, training and public awareness.

Officials stated that 59 Master Trainers and 1,109 Field Trainers have already been designated, while approximately 83,535 enumerators and supervisors, including reserve personnel, will be deployed during Phase-1 operations across Assam. Addressing the conference, Ravi Kota stressed the importance of coordinated administrative efforts, public participation and timely preparedness for successful conduct of Census 2027.

Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India Mrityunjay Kumar Narayan highlighted the significance of technological interventions, self-enumeration and digital monitoring systems for ensuring transparent and accurate data collection. Biswajit Pegu also underlined the importance of public cooperation and adherence to responsibilities prescribed under the Census Act, 1948 for the successful conduct of the nationwide exercise.

## Bhutan PM arrives

to strengthen its historic ties and friendly relations with neighbouring Bhutan in the spirit of regional cooperation, mutual respect and shared prosperity.

"Assam and Bhutan share an age-old relationship rooted in mutual trust, harmony and deep socio-cultural ties. Our enduring friendship has been strengthened over generations through close people-to-people connections, shared traditions and longstanding cooperation across diverse sectors," Bora said.

"I firmly believe that the visit of the prime minister of Bhutan to Assam will further deepen the special bond between Assam and Bhutan, while opening new avenues of goodwill, cooperation and cultural exchange for the greater benefit of our people," he added.

Assam police chief Harmeet Singh, General Administration Department secretary Narsing Pawar and other senior officials of the state government also accompanied Bora in receiving the Bhutan prime minister. (PTI)

## Information ops, perception

perception and that of the adversary, the emphasis has now shifted towards international response and reaction. We are witnessing this in various ongoing military conflicts across the globe," he said.

"We are witnessing the rise of deepfakes, bot networks, manufactured narratives, collective propaganda and digitally amplified misinformation. In such chaos, it becomes difficult to determine who is winning and who is losing," he pointed out. The Army has created specialised and tailor-made structures, mechanisms and strategies to effectively implement information operations, the former COAS said, adding the this domain is no longer handled by generalists.

It has become a specialised field and the defence establishment has realised that, he said.

Referring to past and ongoing conflicts, he said the Gulf War (in the early 1990s) marked the beginning of live televised warfare, while the Russia-Ukraine conflict highlighted the growing importance of open-source intelligence, social media and narrative building. Citing the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, Gen Pande said the incident underscored the need for restraint in media reporting during sensitive operations. He added that the role of media remains equally important in the ongoing West Asia conflict.

"In my opinion, the importance of press and media in the overall national security framework is extremely high. Media should not be seen merely as an arm of the state, but as a pillar of democratic resilience. The media is a strategic asset. The media is not a mute spectator," Pande opined. (PTI)

## Stock markets jump over 1 pc as crude drops below USD 100/barrel; Sensex climbs 1k pts

**MUMBAI, May 25:** Benchmark equity indices Sensex and Nifty surged over 1 per cent on Monday, driven by a sharp correction in crude oil prices and a rally in global markets amid improving sentiment surrounding the US-Iran negotiations.

An appreciating rupee against the US dollar and intense buying in banking and financial stocks also bolstered sentiment, traders said.

The 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 1,073.61 points, or 1.42 per cent, to settle at 76,488.96. During the day, it soared 1,143.72 points, or 1.51 per cent, to 76,559.07.

A total of 2,785 stocks advanced, while 1,535 declined and 211 remained unchanged on the BSE.

The 50-share NSE Nifty surged 312.40 points, or 1.32 per cent, to end at 24,031.70.

"Sentiment was primarily driven by optimism surrounding a potential US-Iran peace agreement, which triggered a sharp correction in crude oil prices. Brent crude slipped below the USD 100 per barrel mark for the first time in over two weeks and gradually inched toward the USD 95 level.

"Additionally, the outperformance of private banking majors, supportive earnings announcements, and the rupee's further strengthening against the US dollar aided the recovery," Ajit Mishra, SVP, Research, Regigare Broking Ltd, said.

From the 30-Sensex firms, Bajaj Finance, Larsen & Toubro, HDFC Bank, Eternal, Bajaj Finserv, and Kotak Mahindra Bank were among the biggest winners.

In contrast, Infosys, Tata Consultancy Services, Sun Pharma and Hindustan Unilever were the laggards.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, tanked 5.52 per cent to USD 97.82 per barrel.

The rupee appreciated 35 paise to close at 95.25 (provisional) against the US dollar on Monday, regis-

tering the third straight session of gain.

The US has made significant progress in negotiations with Iran to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, but President Donald Trump is maintaining a cautious approach and will not accept a bad deal, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said on Monday.

"Markets witnessed strong positive momentum, driven by a correction in crude oil prices amid rising expectations of a potential US-Iran deal. Global sentiment improved on reports of progress towards reopening the Strait of Hormuz, although credibility remains uncertain given frequent shifts in developments," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Investments Limited, said.

The BSE SmallCap Select index jumped 1.18 per cent, and the MidCap Select index climbed 0.92 per cent.

Among sectoral indices, PSU Bank surged 2.96 per cent, Bankex (2.27 per cent), Top 10 Banks (2.19 per cent), Private Banks index (2.07 per cent), Financial Services (2.06 per cent), Telecommunication (1.89 per cent) and Auto (1.76 per cent).

On the other hand, FMCG and Hospitals were the laggards.

In Asian markets, Japan's Nikkei 225 index and Shanghai's SSE Composite index ended higher. Markets were closed in South Korea and Hong Kong due to holidays.

European markets were trading higher.

US markets ended in positive territory on Friday.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth ₹ 4,440.47 crore on Friday, according to exchange data.

In the previous session on Friday, the Sensex climbed 231.99 points, or 0.31 per cent, to settle at 75,415.35. The Nifty edged higher by 64.60 points, or 0.27 per cent, to end at 23,719.30. (PTI)

## Fuel supply being monitored on daily basis after dryouts in select pockets

**NEW DELHI, May 25:** The government is monitoring fuel supplies across the country on a daily basis and taking immediate corrective steps to ensure adequate stocks are available, a senior official said on Monday, citing panic buying at petrol pumps in parts of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh.

Sujata Sharma, Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, said the country has enough stocks of petrol, diesel and domestic cooking gas LPG and dryouts at a few pumps was a result of a 20-30 per surge in demand due to a combination of factors, such as increased consumption in agriculture and bulk users tapping petrol pumps for their needs because of the price difference.

Also, private pumps selling petrol and diesel at rates that are at least ₹ 5 and ₹ 3 per litre higher than PSUs led to a shift to retail outlets of oil marketing companies, resulting in dryouts in some parts.

Sharma said oil marketing companies were closely tracking retail outlets and replenishing stocks to prevent any fuel dry-outs as demand surged in some regions.

"All retail outlets are being closely monitored at the level of oil marketing companies and the petro-



leum ministry...supply situation is being closely monitored to immediately address any intermittent dryouts and to replenish stocks of petrol and diesel at all retail outlets," she said.

"The country has a sufficient supply of LPG, petrol and diesel."

She urged consumers to avoid panic buying, conserve fuel and shift to alternatives, such as piped natural gas and induction cookers, wherever possible.

Explaining the situation, she said petrol pumps normally hold stocks

to meet 2-3 days of requirement. And when there is a sudden growth of 20-30 per cent, there could be some difficulty due to last-mile constraints in immediately moving stocks.

"It isn't that depots and terminals do not have sufficient stocks, but last-mile constraints lead to some difficulty," she said.

"To manage such a situation, monitoring of the retail network is being done daily. And it is being deavoured that if there is any place needing replenishment of stocks, it

## Party leaders express confidence in central and state leadership to address hill districts' aspirations

### BJP-EKADC lauds Tuliram Ronghang for raising autonomous state demand

**HT Bureau**  
**DIPHU, May 25:** The BJP-East Karbi Anglong District Committee (BJP-EKADC) has formally expressed its deep gratitude to Tuliram Ronghang, the Chief Executive Member (CEM) of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) and MLA of Rongkhang. The praise follows Ronghang's strong advocacy for the creation of an autonomous state during the third day of the Assam Legislative Assembly session on Monday.

Speaking at a press conference held at the Atal Bihari Vajpayee Bhawan—the BJP-EKADC headquarters—the party's media and publicity secretary, Bidyasing Rongpi, highlighted the historical context of the movement. He noted that the residents of Assam's three hill districts—Karbi Anglong, West Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao have been pursuing the demand for an autonomous state for four decades through various political movements and grassroots initiatives.

Rongpi recalled that during the 207th session of the KAAC, a formal resolution demanding an autonomous state was passed under Ronghang's leadership and subse-



quently forwarded to the Union Home Ministry. "Keeping the same spirit alive, Tuliram Ronghang again raised the matter in the Assam Assembly, reflecting the long-standing aspirations of the people of the hill districts," Rongpi stated.

The BJP-EKADC emphasised that the party has consistently backed the statehood demand. Rongpi reminded the public of past assurances made by high-profile national BJP leaders during their visits to the region, including LK Advani (former Union Home Minister) at Kheroni; Rajnath Singh (Union Defence Minister) at Dokmoka; Nitin Gadkari (Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways) at Diphu and Tapir Gao

(BJP National Leader), who provided written support. Additionally, current Assembly Speaker Ranjeet Kumar Dass had previously voiced his support for the cause during his tenure as the state BJP president.

The committee expressed confidence that the long-pending demand would finally be realised under the joint leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and CEM Tuliram Ronghang.

Echoing these sentiments, BJP-EKADC president Roland Killing also lauded Ronghang's timely intervention and urged the state government to expeditiously address the political aspirations of the hill districts' population.

## Three-vehicle collision in Kokrajhar raises concern

**HT Correspondent**  
**KOKRAJHAR, May 25:** A three-vehicle collision has been reported on the Bishmuri-Ultapani-Saralpara route, raising fresh concerns over reckless driving inside Sikhna Jhwlwao National Park in Kokrajhar district.

The incident took place late Sunday evening, where three persons reportedly received minor injuries. Police rushed to the spot and took stock of the situation and the injured were released after a health check-up.

Remarkably, incidents of rash driving have increased significantly following the improvement of roads passing through the national park area.

Environmentalists and local residents have expressed concern that overspeeding vehicles inside the protected forest corridor are posing serious threats to wildlife inhabiting the park.

Rash driving inside the national park has previously led to the death of rare wildlife, including a Golden Langur and a Hornbill.

Local people have urged the district administration and the government of BTC to take necessary steps against over speeding and reckless driving in the area to prevent further road accidents.

## Allegation of misappropriation of road repair funds in West KA sparks outrage

**HT Correspondent**  
**KHERONI, May 25:** A serious allegation of misappropriation of public funds meant for road repairs has surfaced in the Arnam-Teplong area of West Karbi Anglong, sparking widespread resentment among local residents.

According to reports, keeping in mind the deplorable condition of the local roads and in response to long-standing demands of villagers ahead of the Assembly elections, Tuliram Ronghang—the Chief Executive Member (CEM) of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) and newly elected MLA of

the Rongkhang constituency—had allocated approximately ₹ 20 lakh for road construction and repairs in the region.

However, residents of Padumoni and Arnam-Teplong villages have levelled major allegations against local leaders, claiming that only around ₹ 8 lakh was actually spent on the ground. The villagers alleged that the execution of the project was highly substandard, limited to scattering about 70 dumper trucks of red soil on rural roads and erecting basic bamboo walls in the classrooms of two local schools. The remaining major

portion of the allocated ₹ 20 lakh has allegedly been siphoned off and pocketed by the perpetrators.

The allegations of financial embezzlement have been raised against BJP polling booth presidents and secretaries of the two villages, identified as Ramshing Rongphar, Dhan Ronghang, Dhansing Ronghang and Hemari Lekeche.

The incident has triggered a sharp and mixed reaction in both villages, with locals expressing deep anger over the alleged corruption and demanding a thorough investigation into the matter.

## NE-Vent 6 concludes in Jorhat with startup pitching event



**HT Correspondent**  
**JORHAT, May 25:** The Hub Jorhat at Bosco Institute, Bagchung successfully concluded the sixth edition of its six-month incubation programme, NE-Vent 6, with a business plan pitching event held on Sunday.

Altogether, twenty-one incubatees presented their business ideas and growth plans before an esteemed jury panel comprising Dr Danish Tamuly, Director on Board at NEATE Hub (AIC-AAU Incubation Centre), AAU Jorhat; Sidhartha Bhuyan, Associate Director at Social Alpha and Akash Das, Senior Officer in Corporate Planning and Strategy at Numalgarh Refinery Limited. The jury evaluated the ventures based on innovation, feasibility, scalability and potential social and economic impact.

NE-Vent 6 was launched in December 2025 with its first immersion programme involving dynamic entrepreneurs from across Northeast India. Over the course of the incubation journey, participants received mentoring, capacity-building support, networking opportunities and continuous handholding to strengthen their entrepreneurial ventures.

Speaking on the occasion, the organisers highlighted that NE-Vent is designed not merely as a funding platform but as a comprehensive incubation ecosystem aimed at nurturing entrepreneurship and innovation in the Northeast region. Along with seed funding support for selected champions, the programme places strong emphasis on mentorship, visibility, market linkage and ecosystem engagement for emerging entrepreneurs.

The organisers also announced that applications for the forthcoming cohort (exclusively for women entrepreneurs) of NE-Vent will open shortly. Interested aspiring entrepreneurs from across Northeast India will be able to apply through notifications that will be shared on the organisation's official social media platforms.

NE-Vent is a six-month incubation programme aimed at supporting and accelerating entrepreneurship in the Northeast region of India by enabling young entrepreneurs with resources, guidance and institutional support to transform their ideas into sustainable ventures.

## Man found dead at Haibargaon in Nagaon

**HT Correspondent**  
**NAGAON, May 25:** The body of a man was found near the Haibargaon Police Outpost in Nagaon town on Sunday morning.

The body was discovered beneath the IDBI Bank building in Haibargaon market. Some morning walkers spotted the body and immediately informed the Haibargaon Police Outpost. Police rushed to the scene, recovered the body and sent it to Nagaon Medical College Hospital for post-mortem examination.

Later, family members arrived at the hospital and identified the deceased as Basanta Kalita, 41, a resident of Choto Haibargaon near Nagaon town. According to preliminary information, the man was addicted to drugs. It is suspected that he died due to excessive drug consumption. Police have started an investigation into the incident.

## Special health camp continues across Biswanath

**HT Correspondent**  
**BISWANATH CHARIALI, May 25:** A special camp to combat Japanese Encephalitis (JE), Acute Encephalitis Syndrome (AES) and other vector-borne diseases is currently underway across Biswanath district.

On Sunday, the National Vector Borne Disease Control Programme (NVBDCP) team in collaboration with THE HANS Foundation, conducted awareness and preventive activities at Pavoi Tea Estate under Biswanath Chariali BPHC, along with other areas of the district.

The programme included awareness sessions on JE-AES, blood slide collection, ITBN (Insecticide-Treated Bed Net) activities and the distribution of IEC leaflets among the public to strengthen the prevention and early detection of vector-borne diseases.

Simultaneously, TB screening programmes under the vision of a "TB Mukta Bharat" are continuing in the district.

Furthermore, HPV vaccination drives and awareness activities are being actively conducted to promote better health and disease prevention among girls aged 14 to 15 years.

## Kolong river erosion damages historic Shiva temple in Nagaon



**HT Correspondent**  
**NAGAON, May 25:** Severe erosion by the Kolong river has caused extensive damage to a historic Shiva temple at Karhaligaon village, Puranigudam in Nagaon district. The river, often called the lifeline of Nagaon has been eroding the riverbank since Sunday night.

The erosion destroyed large sections of the temple complex, including the main 'mandap', brick walls and the area housing the temple's sanctum. A major portion of the temple collapsed into the Kolong river during the night. The temple had been constructed just a year ago at a cost of several lakh rupees.

The incident has triggered distress among local residents. Devotees have shifted the temple's sacred 'thapani' to safety and are offering prayers for the protection of the shrine. The main temple structure is now under serious threat as the erosion continues to expand gradually.

Locals have urgently appealed to the local MLA and the District Commissioner to take immediate measures to check the erosion and protect the remaining parts of the historic temple.

## Karbi Anglong administration conducts district-wide public outreach campaign

**HT Bureau**  
**DIPHU, May 25:** The District Administration of Karbi Anglong successfully organised a series of awareness, outreach and grievance redressal programmes under the campaign "Jan Bhagidaari - Jan Jatya Garima Utsav - Sabse Door, Sabse Pehle" across the district from 18th to 25th May 2026.

The campaign was conducted with the objective of ensuring last-mile delivery of government services and strengthening citizen participation in governance, especially in remote tribal areas of the district. A district-wide IEC (Information, Education & Communication) campaign was carried out in all Development Blocks through Village Development Committees (VDCs), covering interior and far-flung villages. As part of the programme, awareness and Jan

Sunwai sessions were organised in 27 locations across Nilip, Lumbajong, Langsomepi, Bokajan, Rongmongwe, Samelangso and Howraghat Development Blocks. The programmes were held at community halls, VDC Bhawans, playgrounds, open spaces, market complexes and other public venues to maximise public participation and accessibility.

The initiative witnessed active participation from women, youth, tribal leaders, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Gaon Burhas, frontline workers, ASHA and Anganwadi workers, Village Defence Parties (VDPs) and local residents. A total of 2,368 citizens participated in the campaign, reflecting strong grassroots mobilisation and community engagement. Officials from multiple departments including Health, Agriculture, Food & Civil Sup-

plies, ICDS, DRDA and allied sectors attended the programmes and provided on-the-spot assistance, awareness on welfare schemes and grievance redressal services. During the campaign, issues relating to employment and livelihood, PMAY, agriculture, health, infrastructure and DBT schemes were addressed through coordinated departmental intervention. Several public grievances were received and resolved on the spot.

District Commissioner, Karbi Anglong, appreciated the collective efforts of all departments, field functionaries, community organisations and local leaders in ensuring the successful implementation of the campaign and reaffirmed the administration's commitment towards inclusive and people-centric governance in the district.

## Old mortar shell recovered near Indo-Bhutan border in Tamulpur

**HT Correspondent**  
**KOKRAJHAR, May 25:** An old mortar shell was recovered near De-laisree Bazar, Bogajuli along the Indo-Bhutan border in Tamulpur district on Sunday afternoon. According to sources, local residents first spotted the suspicious object on the bank of a stream flowing down from the Bhutan hills and immediately informed nearby Army and SSB camps.

Soon after receiving the information, a joint team of local police, Sashtra Seema Bal and the Indian Army rushed to the spot and safely recovered the mortar shell while maintaining strict security measures. The shell was later shifted to a secure location. Preliminary examination reportedly suggested that the mortar shell was inactive. Notably, a similar mortar shell that had floated into the area through floodwaters last year had exploded while being handled by children, leading to the tragic death of a teenager.

## AJYCP holds protest rally in Jorhat against inflation

**HT Correspondent**  
**JORHAT, May 25:** The Jorhat district unit of the Asom Jatiyatbadi Yuba Chatra Parishad (AJYCP) on Monday took out a rally in the city to protest against skyrocketing prices of essential commodities like food items, fuel and LPG cylinders.

Holding banners and placards, the protesters took out a rally under the 'Gana Pratibad' (Mass Protest) programme, seeking immediate steps from the government to bring down the prices of essential commodities.

Stating that soaring prices of essential goods had hit common people hard, they added that petrol and diesel prices had been hiked for the fourth time in less than two weeks, with the latest increase occurring today.

They pointed out that students living in hostels and PGs, as well as small food outlets and restaurants were severely affected by the sharp hike in commercial LPG prices. The protesters also slammed the BJP-led Central Government for increasing fuel prices just after the elections were held in five states.

## Bodo Sahitya Sabha delegation meets BPF MLAs, raises education issues

**HT Correspondent**  
**KOKRAJHAR, May 25:** A delegation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, led by its president Gopinath Borgory and secretary Nilokanta Goyary, called on MLAs of the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) at the Old Assembly Building in Dispur on Sunday.

The delegation shared their views and concerns regarding the growth and development of Bodo language and literature during the meeting. BPF MLAs, including Assam cabinet minister Charan Boro, were present in the discussion. Several important issues related to Bodo-medium education were raised during the meeting, including delays and irregularities in the timely distribution of textbooks for Bodo-medium students, filling up of vacant teacher posts in Bodo-medium schools and provincialisation of venture schools. The delegation also demanded the introduction of the Bodo language in the Assam Public Service Commission (APSC) and Assam Judicial Service examinations alongside Assamese and English.

Secretary of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha Goyary said that they discussed at length the development and upliftment of Bodo-medium education and literature. He said that students of Bodo-medium schools are often facing shortages of textbooks due to delays in distribution in the state. He urged the state government and concerned authorities to take necessary steps to ensure timely distribution of textbooks.

## Tragic death of national-level athlete Ranjan Mili in road accident

**HT Correspondent**  
**TEZPUR, May 25:** A tragic road accident on National Highway 15 at Dekargaon near Tezpur on Monday morning claimed the life of a promising young athlete, triggering widespread public outrage and protests in the area. The deceased, identified as Ranjan Mili, a Class IX student of Dekargaon Higher Secondary School, died on the spot after being run over by a truck while cycling to school at around 8:45 AM.

As reported, Ranjan, son of Krishna Kanta Mili and Kalpana Mili, residents of Patiachuburi, was on his way to school as usual when a truck moving in the same direction allegedly hit him from behind at Dekargaon Centre. The rear wheel of the truck reportedly passed over his head, resulting in his tragic death. The incident sparked tension in the locality as angry residents blocked the highway and staged protests demanding the immediate installation of speed breakers at the accident-prone stretch.

## Co-wife conflict turns fatal in Dalgaon

**HT Correspondent**  
**DALGAON, May 25:** A shocking incident of murder linked to a secret second marriage has created sensation in Dhekerigaon under Dalgaon Police Station in Assam's Darrang district. A domestic dispute between two co-wives allegedly turned violent late Sunday night, leading to the death of one woman.

According to reports, Siddik Ali, a resident of Kachumari Chapari under Dalgaon Police Station had reportedly entered into a second marriage secretly. Following the marriage, he had been living with his second wife, identified as Jahura Khatun, at her mother's residence in Dhekerigaon.

Sources said Siddik Ali's first wife, Sakina Khatun, later came to know about the marriage. On Sunday night, Sakina reportedly went to Jahura Khatun's residence, where an argument broke out between the two women. The verbal altercation soon escalated into a violent confrontation.

During the clash, Sakina allegedly attacked her co-wife Jahura Khatun with a knife, causing serious injuries. On receiving information, Dalgaon Police rushed to the spot, brought the situation under control and arrested the accused woman.

The injured Jahura Khatun was immediately shifted to Gauhati Medical College and Hospital (GMCH) for treatment. However, despite medical efforts, she succumbed to her injuries.

The incident has triggered shock and tension in the area. Police have launched an investigation and are trying to ascertain all circumstances surrounding the case.

## ONGC Purvanchal Employees Association felicitates meritorious students

**HT Correspondent**  
**SIVASAGAR, May 25:** ONGC Purvanchal Employees Association in its 'Abhinandan 3.0' programme held at the Officers' Club here on Sunday, felicitated 30 meritorious students belonging to the ONGC family. The felicitation programme was attended by AASU General

secretary Utpal Sharma, Sivasagar Senior Superintendent of Police Papori Chetia, ONGC Assam Asset Executive Director Uday Paswan and ATASU president Basanta Gogoi as guests.

ONGC Purvanchal Employees Association General Secretary Sanjeev Barua delivered the welcome speech and said that the event was organised not only to honour achievements, but also to instill healthy thinking, commitment to education and inspire young minds.

Utpal Sharma, speaking as the chief guest, said that education is the main cementing force of nation-building and urged the younger generation to move forward through hard work, social responsibility and moral values.

In their speeches, the other guests highlighted the true meaning of education, discipline, human values and the importance of self-employment in achieving success in life.

The association also specially felicitated Divyanku Ravi Dutta (99.80%) of the Central Board of Secondary Education and Drishan Dutta (97.33%) of the Assam State School Education Council for securing the highest marks in the district in the Class XII examinations.

## Janbhagidari campaign concludes successfully in Nagaon

Over 300 issues resolved on-site during weeklong outreach drive in tribal-dominated villages

**HT Correspondent**  
**NAGAON, May 25:** The week-long 'Janbhagidari' campaign, which began on May 18 across the country, concluded successfully in Nagaon district on Sunday.

Addressing a press conference, District Development Commissioner Devajani Choudhury and Additional Commissioner as well as District Nodal Officer for the campaign, Gopal Sarma, said that large-scale awareness programmes were carried out over the past week in 34 tribal-dominated villages under 16 development blocks of the district.

The campaign was undertaken on the advice of the Central Government under the theme "Janbhagidari - Sabse Door, Sabse



Pehle" with the aim of taking government schemes directly to remote and backward tribal communities. Since such communities are often unable to proac-

tively access government benefits, officials visited the villages to provide services on-site and create awareness.

During the campaign, around 37

health camps were organised. Officials also facilitated the on-the-spot delivery of Aadhaar cards, ration cards, Ayushman Bharat health cards, land transfer documents, Kisan Credit Cards and other services. A total of 304 issues were resolved on-site, while 63 other matters were forwarded to the concerned authorities for further action.

Departments including Health, Panchayat and Rural Development, Public Health Engineering, Food and Civil Supplies, Education, Revenue, Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, Fisheries and PWD actively participated in the programme.

Assistant Commissioner Dr Priyanka Kashyap was also present at the press conference.

## QUOTE OF THE DAY

Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is time to pause and reflect. -Mark Twain

## US threatens to Cuba, Raul Castro

US threatens to Cuban revolutionary leader Raul Castro reek of the extraterritorial arrogance of a thuggish imperial power. They indicate too that the extreme economic war Washington is waging to break the Cuban people could escalate to a direct military attack very soon. The charges levelled at the 94-year-old former president of Cuba — a veteran of the 1959 revolution and a communist even before his great brother Fidel — are a sick joke. Claiming the Cuban military shooting down a plane belonging to the terrorist, Miami exile-based Brothers to the Rescue outfit that had violated Cuban airspace back in the 1990s amounts to murder is to deny Havana the basic rights of a sovereign state — to protect its borders and its people. But then, Washington has denied Cuba those basic rights for over 60 years. The most sustained expression of this has been the illegal blockade, cutting it off from essential trade and imposed on third parties via US legal action against companies that try to do business with Cuba, wherever they are from. Not just an affront to Cuba's rights as a state but to the rights of all states to choose their trading partners, including Britain which has consistently voted, along with the overwhelming majority of countries, at the UN to condemn the blockade but whose banks often enforce it anyway from fear of the US.

Donald Trump's transformation of the blockade into a siege cutting off almost all oil supplies is causing intense suffering and even death as not just transport but hospitals and emergency services lack power for maternity and intensive care wards, diesel for ambulances and fire engines. Now the suggestion that Raul Castro will somehow be dragged before a US court echoes the illegal kidnapping of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro in January, again on totally bogus charges — and via a military assault that saw the US kill 100 people, including 30 Cubans. The cowardice of Western leaders who refused to call out this outrageous violation of international law enables Trump to continue in the same vein. Secretary of State Marco Rubio says a non-military "solution" to this crisis — an entirely artificial crisis created by the White House — is unlikely, that Cuba sponsors terrorism worldwide.

Trump is obsessed with his place in history and bruised by the debacle of his unprovoked war on Iran. Cuba's inclusion on the US list of state sponsors of terrorism — again, a complete invention of the US government — was "justified" by it hosting peace talks between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the Colombian government, in a process brokered jointly by Cuba and Norway which ended a four-decade civil war. It is a scandal that helping end a devastating conflict is being used to smear Cuba in this way.

## India's relaxation to Tea imports from Nepal is welcomed by Kathmandu govt



By: Ashish Biswas

Indian Tea Board and Industry circles are not happy with the recent relaxation allowed by Union Commerce Ministry, to exempt mandatory testing for Nepalese tea imports into the country. The temporary relief has been heartily welcomed in Nepal by the fledgling industry, which expressed its deep concerns as its exports to India declined sharply by about 20% during the first nine months of fiscal year 2025-26.

Given that India happens to be the biggest export destination for Nepal tea, the concern in Kathmandu and beyond was understandable. GOI had been facing a long standing demand from its domestic tea industry to curb the volumes of Nepalese varieties of tea entering India. These were often sold off as Indian products, involving price manipulation and other foul trade practices. Much of Nepal's tea export so other countries too had to pass through India.

The Tea Board, the Tea association and other organisations alleged that despite repeated requests, a section of Nepalese producers were not doing enough to stop trade malpractices that involved selling off essentially cheaper Nepalese varieties as Indian products. This hurt the prospects and the general image of the bigger India-based industry.

GOI therefore introduced a new system of testing the quality of Nepalese varieties meant to be sold in India at a Kolkata lab before allowing a sale. Samples of Nepalese tea would be taken from the Indo Nepal border all the way to West Bengal and the results would be conveyed to the exporters.

The process, according to anxious Nepalese producers, would take an average 15 day period, the kind of delay that was simply unacceptable. They frantically pressed Kathmandu-based authorities to take up the issue with GOI.

Observers see the Indian decision to do away with the quality testing for Nepalese varieties to be imported into India as a temporary measure to allow some relief for Nepal, more as a diplomatic move than anything else. But that has not stopped the bigger Indian industry from immediately renewing its earlier campaign — it leaves the bigger industry in a vulnerable position that cannot be allowed to continue indefinitely.

Nepalese authorities too, appreciate the complex nature of the problem. There is much discussion on how to reduce Nepal's near total dependence in India for its exports, in terms of sheer quantity, if not quality. Nepal exports its tea to the UK, Germany, Turkey, Iraq, Russia and the UAE among others. But the quantities involved are much smaller not to mention the built-in advantages of the vast Indian market, its proximity to Nepal and other factors. There are no detailed plans as yet to try to replace India as the leading buyer, although proposals to increase sales to Pakistan and Bangladesh are heard from time to time.

For the record over 55,000 people depend on the production of tea in Nepal, plantations numbering over 160, and farmers, over 14,000. Spread over 21,000 hectares, the industry earned over Rs 4 billion (Nepalese currency) in exports last year with India accounting for around Rs 2.30 billion. The almost total halt in the supply of tea to India as a result of the mandatory testing arrangements had already cost the Nepalese producers a hefty loss of around 20% in earnings, according to Nepalese authorities. (IPA Service)

# Rural Economy and Assamese Society

The rural economy, which stands as the backbone of Assam's social structure, has now reached a critical juncture. The image of the self-reliant villages that once existed in our imagination is rapidly beginning to change. This society, which survived by depending on agriculture, is now facing severe challenges not only in the field of production but also in distribution and marketing. At one time, the village economy was based on the barter system, where mutual dependence among people was greater. But the influence of globalization and the open market has shaken that old economic structure of the villages. In the present rural society, surviving merely through traditional farming has become impossible, as a result of which the very nature of the rural economy has started to change. The primary reason behind this transformation is the increase in the purchasing power of rural people and their attraction towards a modern lifestyle. Unlike earlier times, merely producing some rice or vegetables is no longer enough for a farmer's family to survive. Money is now necessary for the education of his children, healthcare, and other modern facilities, which our traditional rural economy cannot always provide. As a consequence, the youth of the villages are being compelled to abandon agriculture and move towards cities, and this migration has disrupted the social and economic balance of rural society.

The weakest aspect of Assam's rural economy is its excessive dependence on nature. Every year, floods and river erosion cripple every layer of the rural economy. The dreams of production that a farmer nurtures throughout the year with backbreaking labour are destroyed within moments by a single flood. Yet, no permanent solution to this problem has emerged from the government or policymakers even today. Farmers who cultivate by taking loans fall into deep financial crises after floods, and to recover from such crises, they are forced to approach moneylenders or banks. Thus begins a cycle of debt in rural society, which gradually destroys the very foundation of the village economy. In recent times, it has been observed that while government aid and assistance may provide temporary relief to farmers, strengthening the rural economy without long-term planning is impossible. The use of modern technology in agriculture has still not become widespread in Assam's rural society. Although tractors have replaced bullocks and ploughs in some places, not everyone has the capacity to bear the expenses. On the other hand, the lack of awareness regarding soil testing and the use of high-quality seeds has created obstacles in increasing production. Consequently, production costs have increased, but due to the failure to receive fair prices in the market, farmers have become frustrated.

The villages of Assam possess a rich tradition of handicrafts and weaving, which once formed an important component of the rural economy. At one time, the sound of looms could be heard in the courtyards of every household in Assam, and this was a complementary part of the rural economy. But in the face of the challenges of the mechanized age, it has become difficult for these cottage industries to survive. Cheap and better-quality clothes arriving from outside states have occupied Assam's rural markets, as a result of which our local weavers are unable to receive fair value for their labour. Demand increases slightly only during Bihu or special festivals, but that is not enough for the entire year. In this sector, the amount of government patronage that was necessary has remained negligible in reality. Attempts have been made to organize these industries through cooperative systems, but due to corruption and the lack of proper management, rural artisans continue to be exploited. Because of the absence of direct links with markets, middlemen take away the lion's share of the profits, while the actual producer struggles

to enter villages more easily. As a result, rural markets are now filled entirely with products from outside companies. Old village shops have been replaced by large distributors, causing severe economic distress to small traders. Unless these contradictions within the rural economy are resolved, the overall development of Assamese society will remain impossible.

Another new dimension has recently been added to Assam's rural society through self-help groups. Particularly among women, attempts are being made to bring dynamism to the rural economy through savings and microloans. It is true that in many cases women have reduced the financial burden of their families by engaging in small businesses alongside household work. But this too has a negative side. At present, many rural women are becoming financially ruined after falling into the trap of microfinance institutions. Loans taken merely for consumption rather than for productive activities have created a frightening situation in rural society. Many families have been forced to leave their homes because they were unable to repay loan installments. One thing is clear here: without financial literacy, such inflows of capital into the rural economy have caused more harm than benefit. Unless proper awareness regarding the use and saving of money develops within society, the rural economy cannot become strong merely through the assistance of external capital. The growing attraction towards luxury among villagers has further deepened this crisis. An economy that functions only on loans without production can never be sustainable, and its consequences have brought moral degradation to society as a whole.

The most discussed aspect of Assam's rural economy is the migration of the younger generation to other states. Assam's villages are now gradually turning into shelters only for the elderly and children. Finding no avenue for employment in their own villages, capable young men are rushing towards places like Chennai, Bengaluru, or Kerala in search of labour work. As a result, agricultural lands in villages are lying barren, and the agrarian character of Assamese society is steadily fading away. Houses in villages may have become concrete structures with the money sent from outside states, but the basic economic foundation of the villages has been destroyed. This is an economy of dependence where we rely more on others than on our own production. Villages that once supplied food to entire districts are now dependent on rice and vegetables imported from other states. This transformation is not merely economic; it is a deep social crisis. The mentality of feeling ashamed to labour on one's own land while considering migrant labour outside the state as an alternative is pushing Assamese society towards a dangerous future. The unity and mutual sympathy that once existed in village communities centred around agriculture are also beginning to disappear amidst this ruthless competition for money.

In the present governmental system, direct benefit transfer or DBT schemes have created mixed reactions in rural society. Through schemes like Orunodoi and other welfare programmes, some cash has reached poor families, which has provided them temporary support. But questions are also being raised as to whether this has created laziness and dependence within rural society. Earlier, people understood the value of money earned through hard work, but now a tendency is visible where people are moving away from productive activities while depending on free rice and government assistance. To strengthen the rural economy, it is not enough merely to provide fish for consumption; people must also be taught how to catch fish. Concrete roads have indeed been constructed in villages in the name of infrastructure development, but instead of enabling village products to reach markets, those roads have mainly allowed urban goods

to enter villages more easily. As a result, rural markets are now filled entirely with products from outside companies. Old village shops have been replaced by large distributors, causing severe economic distress to small traders. Unless these contradictions within the rural economy are resolved, the overall development of Assamese society will remain impossible.

Despite the immense potential of animal husbandry and fish farming within Assam's rural economy, we still remain far behind in these sectors. If Assam's water bodies and vast char areas were utilized scientifically, we could not only become self-reliant but also export fish and meat to other states. But unfortunately, even today our rural society remains dependent on ice-preserved fish imported from Andhra Pradesh. This is a glaring example of our economic failure. If educated rural youth adopt modern fish farming or animal husbandry as professions, the landscape of the rural economy would not take long to change. But for this, the necessary training, capital, and market support are still difficult to obtain within rural society. Due to the lack of coordination among government departments and schemes trapped within bureaucratic files, genuine beneficiaries are unable to avail themselves of these opportunities. Furthermore, irregular electricity supply in rural areas and the absence of cold storage facilities often make businesses related to dairy products or fish unprofitable. Without solving these basic problems, reforming the rural economy merely through speeches is impossible.

Changes in the rural economy are also transforming the social fabric of Assamese society. Earlier, whenever a festival or event took place in a village, the entire community gathered together and contributed according to their capacities. But now that collective spirit has been replaced by a race for personal prestige. Those with more money seek to display their status within society. This money-centric mentality has polluted the pure atmosphere of the villages. Even village management committees and religious functions now clearly reflect the influence of economics. As a result, economically weaker people have begun to feel inferior within society. The strength once embodied by the concept of "Rajiv," which stood united against all forms of injustice, has weakened due to economic divisions. This fragmentation has not only disturbed village harmony but has also created fascination among the younger generation for alien cultures. Interest in folk arts and folk music has declined, while cheap forms of modern entertainment have gained influence. This is an important issue because every economic transformation also changes the mentality of society, and in Assam's case, this transformation has not been entirely beneficial.

The condition of government schools in villages is gradually deteriorating. Those who possess even a little money prefer to send their children to private schools in towns. As a result, a class division has emerged within the rural education system. The education that poor farmers' children are able to receive is often inadequate to compete with the modern market. Similarly, in the field of healthcare, rural people continue to suffer immensely. Travelling to towns for ordinary treatment and bearing the enormous expenses often leaves rural families financially ruined. To revive the rural economy, it is essential to ensure quality education and healthcare within villages themselves. Otherwise, no matter how much money enters villages, it will ultimately flow back into profit-driven urban institutions. Preventing this outflow of wealth from villages is the key to rebuilding the rural economy. But the present neoliberal economy considers villages merely as markets rather than centres of production. Unless this perspective changes, the future of Assamese rural society will remain bleak.

The impact of climate change on Assam's rural economy also cannot be ignored. Irregular rainfall and excessive heat have altered agricultural schedules. Farming can no longer be carried out according to traditional timings. As a result, crop damage has increased along

with attacks from new pests and insects. To fight these problems, farmers are compelled to use increasing amounts of pesticides and fertilizers, which not only raise their expenses but also damage soil fertility. Without long-term planning, these problems cannot be solved. The spread of organic farming within rural society, which should have occurred, still remains confined largely to slogans. Although organic products fetch higher prices in markets, ordinary farmers are unable to access those markets. The certification systems and marketing networks necessary for this still remain urban-centred. If we genuinely seek fundamental transformation of the rural economy, cold storage facilities and small processing centres must be established in every village so that farmers are not forced to sell their products at low prices. These small steps alone can lead rural society towards self-reliance.

Land disputes remain a major problem in Assam's villages. Due to the absence of proper land records, many farmers are unable to obtain bank loans. Moreover, with the division of families, landholdings have fragmented into smaller plots where large-scale farming is no longer profitable. For this reason, the concept of cooperative or collective farming has become extremely necessary. But within our society, attraction towards private ownership has continued to obstruct cooperative thinking. Although the government has introduced new land reform policies, their benefits have yet to reach the last person in the villages. The transfer of agricultural land into the hands of non-farmers is an alarming sign for the rural economy. In the name of industrialization and urbanization, vast stretches of fertile agricultural land have been destroyed, which will affect our food security in the future. If rural society cannot protect its land, its economic independence can never be ensured. The inseparable relationship between land and farmers is not merely emotional; it is a harsh struggle for survival.

The tourism sector has also brought new hope to Assam's rural economy. Through rural tourism, villagers have opportunities to earn income by showcasing their culture, food habits, and natural beauty. But to give this sector a professional form, villagers require training. Tourism does not emerge merely by constructing a few homestays; an entire ecosystem must be developed for it. Through this, local weavers, artists, and cooks can gain direct earning opportunities. However, care must also be taken to ensure that the original identity and environment of villages are not destroyed in the name of tourism. In most cases, it is observed that the profits of tourism are taken away by large outside travel agencies or middlemen. Unless rural society actively participates in this process, tourism will become merely a showcase rather than a tool for economic development. If the simplicity and hospitality of Assam's rural life can be transformed into economic strength, then our rural economy can attain a unique dimension. But for this, along with government planning, awareness and unity among rural people are essential.

Overall, the relationship between Assam's rural economy and Assamese society is extremely complex and profound. Today, it cannot be viewed solely from an economic perspective; the social and psychological dimensions behind it must also be understood. Rather than making society dependent solely on government grants, the primary goal of modern Assam must be to make people production-oriented. Establishing agriculture as a respectable profession, connecting rural industries with global markets, and improving rural infrastructure are not luxuries but urgent necessities. We often say that the soul of Assamese society resides in the villages, but that soul is now writhing in financial distress. If timely and proper measures are not taken, our villages may eventually become nothing more than residual extensions of cities. The revival of the rural economy may indeed become the true solution for Assam's overall development. For this, what is required is a sharp political will and a spontaneous wave of transformation emerging from rural society itself.

merely an administrative failure; it was a sign of the profound influence such institutions have held. Over the years, relationships within these clubs were formed, policies were influenced, and informal power alliances were formed. This was a social power parallel to democracy, unchecked by elections.

Today, when questions are being raised about the legitimacy, leases, and social appropriateness of these institutions, the debate is no longer merely legal. It becomes a question of the mindset that allowed the British-created sense of superiority to remain a symbol of respect even in independent India. Unfortunately, we bid farewell to the British, but not to Anglicism. We have made the English language, foreign clothing, club culture, and proximity to power synonymous with modernity and prestige. It was this culture that divided democracy into two parts—one India that stood in line, the other India for whom doors opened automatically. One India that voted, the other India that made the decisions.

It's also true that challenging just one club doesn't change the system. The true meaning of democracy isn't simply a change in power, but a change in the power structure itself. If only symbolic action is taken, and other institutions remain unchanged, this debate will remain incomplete. But if the question is raised more broadly about the social and moral justification of private elite clubs built on government land, then this discussion will acquire historical significance.

In fact, the struggle is not just about land, but also about self-respect. The question is whether India will truly embrace its democratic spirit, or will it continue to perpetuate the colonial superiority complex with new faces. Democracy doesn't reside solely in the recesses of Parliament; it is also tested the moment an ordinary citizen stands before the door of power. If that door is closed simply because they lack lineage, connections, or a special class identity, then democracy is incomplete.

India needs clubs, cultural centers, sports institutions—but not institutions that become private empires disconnected from the public. Platforms that honor Indianness, not reproduce colonial superiority. Democracy isn't just about voting, but about experiencing equality.

Perhaps the time has come for India to take its democracy beyond the Constitution and into those closed doors where equality still awaits entry. (Dr Priyanka Saurabh, PhD (Political Science), is a poet and social thinker.)

### DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan



## The Delhi court and the illusion of democracy

By: Dr Priyanka Saurabh

Delhi is not only the capital of India, but also the ancient chessboard of power, where the pieces change, but the game remains the same. Here, history doesn't reside solely in books, but breathes within the walls of buildings, behind closed doors, and in gleaming corridors. In this city, some paths are for the public, while others are for those who need no introduction. Parallel to the bustling streets of democracy, lie the quiet courts of power, where entry is granted only to those with the invisible passport of influence, lineage, connections, and social standing. The Delhi Gymkhana Club is a shining symbol of this enduring power.

In recent days, as discussions about eviction and the termination of the club's lease intensified, it felt like the first time someone had pointed a finger at a world that had hitherto been considered impossible to even touch. This isn't just about a building; it's about the mindset that has created elitist empires even within a democracy. It's about a system in which some remain the owners, while others are mere spectators.

The Delhi Gymkhana Club was founded by the British in 1913 as the "Imperial Delhi Gymkhana Club." That era was not only one of political subjugation but also one of social humiliation. The British used clubs more as a tool of social segregation than a place of entertainment. Only those who closely resembled the English way of life were considered "civilized." The doors of such clubs were either closed to Indians or were so narrow that even entering them made them feel inferior. Social status was determined by language, clothing, food habits, and even color.

Independence came, the tricolor was raised, and the British departed, but the social structures they had built remained unbroken. Viceroy's House became Rashtrapati Bhavan, the ICS was renamed the IAS, but the spirit of power remained largely unchanged. The chairs once occupied by white gentlemen were later occupied by brown gentlemen. Democracy arrived, but the elite culture remained intact.

The Delhi Gymkhana gradually became the haven for a class that, even in a democracy, never needed to prove itself to the public. Gaining membership was considered more difficult than passing any exam. Years of waiting, fees running into lakhs, and influential connections—all this combined to trans-

form it into a citadel of power accessible only to those with the keys to privilege. The club became more a testament to social status than sport.

Ironically, democracy promises equality, yet in the heart of the capital, islands exist where equality dies at the very entrance. The average citizen pays taxes, yet he or she doesn't even have easy access to the land where these clubs stand. Bulldozers can be used to demolish the slums of the poor, and street vendors can be removed from the sidewalks, but few dare to question these permanent empires, spread across government land worth thousands of acres.

The cruellest truth about Delhi is that the poor are always temporary, while the rich are always permanent. Rickshaw pullers are asked, "When will you move?", but no one asks the elite clubs, built on government land for decades, when their rights will end. This isn't just economic inequality, but psychological inequality. Society has normalized it by labeling it prestige and dignity.

But the story isn't limited to the Gymkhana. Whether it's the Delhi Golf Club, the India International Centre, or the India Habitat Centre—these are not just institutions, but parallel worlds of power. The Delhi Golf Club isn't just about sports; it's where a silent dialogue between power and capital takes place. From the outside, the India International Centre appears to be a cultural platform, but inside, it becomes a rebirth place for retired power. People whose positions have ended, yet their influence still lives on, meet there. At the India Habitat Centre, discussions on poverty and social justice take place in air-conditioned auditoriums, while the ordinary citizen standing outside those very discussions is unable to even become a part of the world being talked about in their name.

This is the true power of permanent power. Governments change, ministers change, political slogans change, but this network remains secure under every regime. This is a class that does not fear electoral defeat, because its power derives not just from politics but from social influence and institutional influence. This is why Delhi can be called not only the political capital but also the capital of permanent power.

History bears witness that even those at the top of power have often failed to challenge this structure. During Rajiv Gandhi's tenure, there was discussion of eliminating this club for security reasons, but it was not possible. This was not

# BJP govt in Assam and West Bengal: Promises and challenges ahead

By: Dr Ratan Bhattacharjee

The emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party as a dominant political force in eastern and northeastern India marks one of the most significant transformations in contemporary Indian politics. For decades, West Bengal and Assam followed very different political trajectories. West Bengal remained shaped by Left ideology and later regional political nationalism, while Assam experienced complex movements rooted in identity, migration, and regional aspirations. Yet in recent years, the BJP has steadily expanded its influence in both states, presenting itself as a party of nationalism, development, governance, and administrative reform. The rise of BJP governments or the possibility of stronger BJP-led governance in West Bengal and Assam has generated intense public debate regarding the promises they offer and the challenges they must confront.

In Assam, the BJP has already established itself as a major governing force. Its rise was built upon a combination of regional sentiment, promises of development, concerns regarding illegal immigration, and the desire for political stability. In West Bengal, although the party has not yet formed the state government, it has emerged as the principal opposition force and has significantly altered the political balance of the state. Together, these two states represent an important frontier for the BJP's political vision in eastern India.

One of the central promises associated with BJP governance in both West Bengal and Assam is the emphasis on development-oriented policies. The BJP has consistently projected itself as a party focused on infrastructure, connectivity, industrialization, and modernization. In Assam, this vision has been reflected in the expansion of highways, bridges, railway connectivity, and investment initiatives. Improved connectivity in the Northeast has been presented as a crucial component of integrating the region with the broader Indian economy. Massive infrastructure projects such as bridges across the Brahmaputra River symbolize not only engineering achievements but also political messaging centered on development and national integration.

In West Bengal, the BJP has promised similar economic transformation. Supporters argue that the state, once one of India's industrial leaders, requires a revival of manufacturing, investment, and employment generation. Kolkata, which historically served as an intellectual and commercial center, has witnessed periods of industrial



decline and economic stagnation. A BJP government would likely seek to attract private investment, strengthen digital infrastructure, modernize ports, and promote entrepreneurship. The party often claims that closer coordination between the state and the central government could accelerate economic growth and improve administrative efficiency.

Employment generation remains one of the biggest expectations in both states. Large numbers of educated youth continue to struggle with unemployment and underemployment. In Assam, many young people seek opportunities outside the state due to limited industrial growth. In West Bengal, migration to other Indian cities for employment has become increasingly common among educated youth. The BJP's promise of industrial expansion and business-friendly policies appeals particularly to younger voters aspiring for economic mobility and professional opportunities.

Another major promise involves governance reforms and anti-corruption measures. The BJP frequently positions itself as a party committed to administrative transparency and accountability. In West Bengal, allegations of corruption involving recruitment scandals, local syndicates, and political favoritism have become major political issues. The BJP has used these controversies to strengthen its narrative that the state requires systemic administrative reform. In Assam, the government has attempted to project an image of stronger governance and more disciplined administration compared to earlier eras marked by political instability and insurgency.

Law and order has also emerged as a major political issue in both states. In West Bengal, political vi-

olence during elections and local conflicts has drawn national attention. The BJP argues that stronger policing, impartial administration, and protection of democratic rights are essential for restoring public confidence. In Assam, law and order is closely connected to ethnic tensions, border management, insurgency-related concerns, and migration issues. The BJP government has attempted to project firmness on matters related to security and regional stability.

Identity politics plays a particularly important role in Assam. The question of illegal immigration from neighboring Bangladesh has shaped Assamese politics for decades. The BJP capitalized on anxieties regarding demographic change, citizenship, and cultural identity. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) process and debates surrounding the Citizenship Amendment Act became central political themes. Supporters viewed these measures as necessary for protecting indigenous identity and national security, while critics argued that they created fear, uncertainty, and social polarization. Balancing national security concerns with humanitarian sensitivities remains one of the greatest challenges for governance in Assam.

In West Bengal, identity politics takes a somewhat different form. Bengali linguistic and cultural pride occupies a central place in the state's public life. Critics of the BJP sometimes accuse the party of imposing excessive centralization or attempting to weaken regional cultural identity. As a result, any BJP government in West Bengal would face the challenge of balancing nationalism with respect for Bengali cultural traditions, literature, and intellectual heritage. The ability to communicate with sensi-

tivity toward regional identity would be crucial for political success.

Education and culture also form important areas of governance. Both Assam and West Bengal possess rich literary and cultural traditions. Assam is known for its vibrant heritage of literature, music, theater, and indigenous traditions, while West Bengal carries the legacy of the Bengal Renaissance, Nobel laureates, and intellectual movements. A BJP government would need to ensure that modernization and educational reforms do not alienate regional cultural sentiments. At the same time, educational institutions in both states require improvement in infrastructure, research facilities, and merit-based recruitment systems.

Religious and communal harmony presents another significant challenge. Both states are socially diverse and contain substantial religious minorities. Political rhetoric during elections sometimes deepens social divisions. Critics often accuse the BJP of encouraging polarization, while supporters argue that the party emphasizes equal treatment and national unity. Regardless of political interpretation, maintaining communal harmony is essential for economic growth, democratic stability, and social peace. Any perception of exclusion or discrimination could create long-term instability and distrust.

The rural economy remains a critical concern. Agriculture continues to employ large populations in both Assam and West Bengal. Tea plantations in Assam, rice cultivation, fisheries, and traditional crafts support millions of livelihoods. Similarly, rural Bengal depends heavily on agriculture, small businesses, and local industries.

Governments must ensure fair prices for farmers, rural infrastructure, irrigation facilities, and welfare programs. Development cannot remain confined to urban centers alone; it must improve the lives of ordinary villagers and marginalized communities.

Environmental challenges also demand attention. Assam faces recurring floods caused by the Brahmaputra River, leading to massive displacement and economic losses each year. Climate change, erosion, and ecological vulnerability threaten livelihoods across the state. West Bengal, too, confronts environmental risks, especially in the Sundarbans region where rising sea levels and cyclones create severe humanitarian concerns. A BJP government in either state would need comprehensive environmental policies combining economic development with ecological protection.

Another important aspect involves the relationship between the central and state governments. Supporters believe that states governed by the BJP may benefit from stronger coordination with the Union government, resulting in faster implementation of projects and better financial support. Infrastructure development, transport corridors, digital initiatives, and welfare schemes may receive greater administrative cooperation. However, critics warn against excessive political centralization and fear that regional autonomy could weaken if state governments become overly dependent on central leadership. Balancing federal cooperation with regional aspirations therefore remains an important democratic challenge.

The political culture of West Bengal and Assam differs significantly, and governance strategies must reflect these differences.

West Bengal has historically valued ideological debate, intellectualism, trade union politics, and cultural activism. Assam's politics, on the other hand, has been deeply influenced by ethnic identity, linguistic concerns, border anxieties, and regional movements. A successful government must recognize these unique historical experiences rather than applying uniform political formulas.

Public expectations also create enormous pressure. Political campaigns often generate hope for rapid transformation. Citizens expect immediate improvements in roads, jobs, healthcare, education, and law enforcement. However, structural reforms require time, investment, and institutional capacity. Economic growth cannot be achieved overnight. Therefore, managing expectations while ensuring visible progress becomes a crucial political responsibility.

The BJP's political expansion in West Bengal and Assam also reflects larger national changes in Indian politics. The party has increasingly sought to move beyond its traditional strongholds and establish itself as a truly pan-Indian political force. Success in eastern India carries symbolic as well as electoral significance. However, long-term political sustainability depends not only on electoral victories but also on governance outcomes, social inclusion, and public trust.

Women's empowerment is another area where expectations remain high. Both West Bengal and Assam have witnessed increasing participation of women in education, self-help groups, and public life. Governments must focus on women's safety, healthcare, financial independence, and educational opportunities. Policies supporting maternal healthcare, entrepreneur-

ship, and skill development can significantly strengthen social progress.

Healthcare infrastructure remains another major challenge. Rural hospitals, medical colleges, and public health systems require modernization and expansion. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the importance of strong healthcare systems and administrative preparedness. Investments in medical education, telemedicine, and rural healthcare delivery will be essential for long-term human development.

Ultimately, the promises and challenges facing BJP governance in West Bengal and Assam reflect the broader complexities of Indian democracy itself. These states possess extraordinary cultural diversity, historical depth, and social dynamism. Development alone cannot ensure political success unless accompanied by social harmony, democratic accountability, and respect for regional identities. Similarly, identity politics without economic progress cannot satisfy the aspirations of younger generations seeking opportunity and stability.

The future of West Bengal and Assam will depend on how effectively governments can balance nationalism with regional identity, development with social justice, and political ambition with democratic responsibility. Whether through industrial growth, educational reform, infrastructure expansion, or administrative transparency, the ultimate measure of governance will lie in improving the lives of ordinary people. If governments succeed in creating inclusive growth, strengthening institutions, and maintaining peace and dignity for all communities, both West Bengal and Assam can emerge as powerful engines of progress in eastern India.

# Greening India's highways: A sustainable path forward

By: Dipak Kurmi

*The economic rationale underpinning this macro-policy shift is remarkably compelling when analyzed against India's broader international trade realities. At present, India imports approximately Rs 70,000 crore worth of timber, wood pulp, and derivative wood products annually, exposing its domestic manufacturing base to volatile global supply chains and putting substantial pressure on its foreign exchange reserves.*

India is currently expanding its civil highway infrastructure at an unprecedented pace, establishing a vast web of high-speed corridors designed to catalyze long-term macroeconomic growth and industrial synchronization. Under the ambitious remit of the Bharatmala Pariyojana and the expansive, multi-sectoral blueprint of Vision 2047, thousands of kilometers of newly minted expressways and economic highways are systematically reshaping regional connectivity, drastically reducing logistics costs, and accelerating domestic commercial velocity. However, this monumental civil engineering transformation simultaneously imposes an escalating ecological and public-health burden that demands immediate, sophisticated policy intervention. Highway corridors are increasingly transforming into localized zones of intense pollution accumulation, severe landscape fragmentation, and acute agricultural risk. Because significant portions of these high-velocity arterial networks traverse densely populated, highly fertile agricultural heartlands, the negative externalities generated by vehicular emissions and infrastructural runoff extend far beyond the literal edge of the asphalt carriageway, directly jeopardizing rural communities and natural ecosystems.

To reconcile these diverging trajectories of economic mobility and environ-

mental preservation, India requires a fundamental paradigm shift in its overarching infrastructure doctrine. Transport corridors must no longer be viewed strictly through the narrow lens of civil engineering and logistics efficiency, but rather reclassified as complex, integrated socio-economic and ecological landscapes. A highly promising and systemic solution to this compounding crisis lies in the deployment of Highway Farm Forestry (HFF). This market-linked, decentralized agroforestry approach encourages farmers whose lands directly adjoin major national highways to voluntarily cultivate high-value, commercially viable tree crops in lieu of conventional, pollution-sensitive food crops. By deliberately establishing these robust tree crop buffer zones, the state can foster a multi-tiered ecological defense system capable of intercepting atmospheric particulate matter, capturing heavy metal depositions, reducing localized ambient noise, and fundamentally mitigating the hazardous exposure vectors that currently threaten the regional agricultural supply chain.

Unlike historical social-forestry programs initiated in the latter half of the twentieth century, which frequently suffered from chronic operational inefficiencies, top-down bureaucratic mandates, and weak institutional market linkages, the contemporary Highway Farm Forestry model is explicitly profitability-driven. Rational rural landowners will only adopt intensive tree

cultivation if the projected financial returns demonstrably exceed their existing baseline land-use income from traditional agrarian cultivation. Fortunately, several fast-growing tree species and woody perennials, including hybrid poplar, industrial bamboo, high-grade ready, Malabar neem, and gamhar, already enjoy robust, well-established demand within domestic industrial manufacturing sectors. By embedding these species into highly structured agrarian landscapes through assured private-sector buyback arrangements and continuous public extension support, roadside agroforestry can transcend conventional conservation paradigms to become a highly lucrative, self-sustaining rural enterprise. This approach aligns individual financial incentives directly with national ecological priorities, ensuring sustained community participation without relying on perpetual public subsidies.

The economic rationale underpinning this macro-policy shift is remarkably compelling when analyzed against India's broader international trade realities. At present, India imports approximately Rs 70,000 crore worth of timber, wood pulp, and derivative wood products annually, exposing its domestic manufacturing base to volatile global supply chains and putting substantial pressure on its foreign exchange reserves. The widespread domestic scaling of Highway Farm Forestry could systematically reduce this heavy import dependence, while simultaneously generating millions of green jobs across the rural landscape and fortifying primary timber industries in precise alignment with the national Make in India agenda. By creating decentralized hubs of wood production along major transportation arteries, the domestic log supply chain achieves optimal spatial efficiency, dramatically shortening the logistical distance between rural production zones and urban processing centers, thereby enhancing the overall competitiveness of Indian wood manufacturing.

Nevertheless, this comprehensive institutional proposal extends far beyond simple timber production and fiber extraction; it represents a sophisticated effort to integrate advanced ecological planning directly into national infrastructure policy. Conventional roadside

green belts, which rely exclusively on public land acquisition within the formal right-of-way, are notoriously difficult to scale across thousands of kilometers of highways due to the exorbitant capital costs and prolonged legal disputes associated with acquiring private land in India. A far more pragmatic and financially viable alternative is the implementation of a differentiated Tiered Zone Framework that optimizes land-use efficiency through voluntary partnerships with local farmers. Under this calibrated spatial model, agrarian lands located nearest to the primary pollution-affected belts, roughly within a one-hundred-meter threshold from the highway edge, are explicitly prioritized for intensive tree-based systems capable of maximum pollution interception. Conversely, agricultural zones extending beyond this immediate hundred-meter boundary can seamlessly transition into mixed agroforestry configurations or sustain conventional food cultivation, depending on localized ecological variables and prevailing rural livelihood conditions.

This highly calibrated, context-specific framework explicitly recognizes that ecological restoration, national food security, and agrarian livelihood resilience must advance in tandem rather than functioning as mutually exclusive policy mandates. Properly designed and spatially optimized roadside tree systems can serve as invaluable ecological stepping stones across heavily fragmented rural landscapes, effectively reconnecting isolated habitats and providing vital spatial continuity for native pollinators, avian species, and local beneficial insects. Furthermore, the substantial plantation biomass generated by these linear agroforestry networks can dramatically accelerate carbon sequestration rates, offering a scalable mechanism for smallholder farmers to participate directly in emerging domestic and international carbon markets. By converting verified carbon mitigation into a tangible, tradeable commodity, the framework introduces a secondary, non-extractive revenue stream that insulates rural households against the accelerating climatic shocks of the twenty-first century.

At the same time, the institutionalization of robust ecological safeguards is absolutely essential to prevent unintended environmental consequences.

The careless propagation of vast monocultural plantations could inadvertently engender novel ecological crises, such as severe biodiversity depletion, heightened vulnerability to catastrophic pest outbreaks, and localized hydrological imbalances. Therefore, species selection protocols within the Highway Farm Forestry paradigm must remain fundamentally science-based, strictly region-specific, and acutely sensitive to local groundwater tables. Ecologically invasive or hyper-water-consuming exotic species must be explicitly excluded from the approved regulatory registries, while the cultivation of diverse, multi-species systems and native timber varieties must be systematically incentivized. It is vital to emphasize that Highway Farm Forestry is not a convenient substitute for cleaner mobility solutions, rapid vehicle electrification, or the enforcement of rigorous environmental impact assessments in infrastructure planning; rather, it must function as a powerful, complementary strategy within a holistic national decarbonisation matrix.

The successful nationwide implementation of this visionary program will ultimately require unprecedented institutional coordination, policy harmonization, and sustained technical support for the farming community. Adjoining landholders must be guaranteed seamless access to certified, high-yielding planting material, advanced silvicultural extension services, highly predictable commodities markets, and significantly simplified harvesting and transit regulations. Encouragingly, the formal introduction of the National Transit Pass System in 2023 has already successfully resolved a historic structural bottleneck by enabling the seamless, digitized interstate movement of timber through a unified One Nation, One Pass regulatory framework. What India urgently requires now is a cohesive national policy vision that officially codifies this synergy, transforming highway corridors from mere linear engines of physical mobility into strategic socio-ecological landscapes that actively cultivate both ecological resilience and enduring economic prosperity for generations to come. (The writer can be reached at dipakkurmipltd@gmail.com)



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## 4 dead, 17 mostly workers still missing, in collapse of unfinished hotel in Philippines



**ANGELES (PHILIPPINES), May 25:** Rescuers pulled out three people Monday from an immense pile of rubble that was all that remained of a nine-storey hotel, which collapsed while under construction in a northern Philippine city, bringing the death toll to four with 17 others still missing, officials said.

Two of the men were dead, while emergency personnel struggled in the early morning hours to revive one in an ambulance near the pile of concrete slabs, twisted iron bars and aluminium scaffolding that was all that remained of the building in Angeles City of Pampanga Province. They eventually gave up and drove away.

The poignant scene was witnessed by a small group of journalists, including those from The Associated Press, who watched hundreds of rescuers led by firefighters and police scrambling for hours to extricate the men, who were at the time alive but trapped under concrete slabs and iron bars.

Rescuers tried to provide water and medicine intravenously to one of the trapped men in a desperate effort to keep him alive in the scorching summer heat, regional police chief Brig. Gen. Jess Mendez told the AP.

"He never made it despite all the efforts," he said. One of the three people pulled out from the rubble on Monday was unidentified and was not on the list of the 17 missing, who were mostly construction workers, according to Angeles City information chief Jay Pelayo.

The fourth dead victim was a Malaysian tourist trapped in a budget inn that was partly hit by the avalanche of debris from the collapsed building. Another guest at the inn was injured but managed to dash out, officials said.

A day after the unfinished building collapsed with a loud crashing sound after a fierce thunderstorm, Angeles City Mayor Carmelo Lazatin said rescue efforts would

still not be shifted to a body retrieval operation.

"My best hope is that we can rescue more people alive," Lazatin told the AP. "We don't want to give the families of the trapped workers any bad news."

Anxiety and fear among relatives of the trapped workers, who are waiting in sheds near the rubble, have deepened.

"I'm losing hope because of what I see — slow rescue work," said Lea Mendoza Casilao, a 47-year-old sardine factory worker whose boyfriend, a mason, was among those still trapped in the rubble.

She brought a week's supply of rice and sardines for him at the construction site, but she said they would never meet as scheduled over the weekend after the building where he was sleeping crumbled before dawn on Sunday.

Lazatin said rescuers were moving carefully because huge slabs of concrete were being held up precariously by a tangle of aluminium scaffolding and could crash down on rescuers.

Twenty-six workers were either rescued or managed to run out of the collapsing building, where they slept on pieces of plywood on the ground floor.

National police chief Gen. Jose Melencio Nartez Jr. said his force will support an "ongoing investigation to determine the cause of the incident and possible violations of safety and building regulations."

Angeles City hosted one of the largest US Air Force bases outside of the American mainland, helping turn Angeles and outlying cities and towns into entertainment and commercial hubs in the main northern Philippine region of Luzon.

Clark Air Base, about 80 kilometres (50 miles) north of Manila, closed in the early 1990s.

The former base has become a bustling industrial and tourism enclave called the Clark Freeport Zone, and is still surrounded by remnants of the US base-era red-light strips, bars, nightclubs, tattoo shops and budget hotels. (AP)

# Leaders keep wary eye on Belarus

**KYIV, May 25:** Belarus' exiled opposition leader visited Kyiv on Monday as the Ukrainian capital cleaned up after Russia's biggest missile attack of the year, and world leaders kept a close eye on how much support the Belarusian government is ready to provide for Moscow's all-out invasion of Ukraine.

Russia and its ally Belarus held joint nuclear drills last week, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has increasingly warned in recent days that Belarus could provide a launchpad for Russia to open a new front in northern Ukraine. Some Russian troops entered Ukraine from Belarusian territory in Moscow's invasion on Feb 24, 2022.

In a further sign that concerns about any Belarusian role are increasing, French President Emmanuel Macron spoke by phone with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko on Sunday, their first call since the all-out war began.

With that conflict more than four years old, the Russian army is locked in a hard and costly slog on the 1,250-kilometre (780-mile) front line that mostly snakes through eastern and southern Ukraine.

"Russia hit a dead-end on the battlefield, so it terrorises Ukraine



with deliberate strikes on city centres," Kaja Kallas, the European Union's foreign policy chief, said in a post on X, in the wake of the weekend barrage that killed two people and damaged buildings across the Ukrainian capital.

With American-made air defence missiles in short supply because of the Iran war, Russian missiles are harder for Ukraine to stop. Meanwhile, US efforts to stop the fighting have made little progress and have now stalled.

**Countries keep a wary eye on Belarus**

Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who arrived by train for her first visit to Kyiv on Monday, said that France

wants to send a warning to Belarus.

"The main goal — to warn Lukashenko that dragging Belarus into the war would be unacceptable," Tsikhanouskaya told The Associated Press on Sunday.

"Lukashenko's regime knows well what needs to be done to improve ties with the European Union, but it isn't happening; instead, hybrid attacks, nuclear blackmail and threats to the entire region continue," she said.

Lukashenko, who has governed Belarus with an iron fist for more than three decades, relies on the Kremlin for cheap energy, loans and other support.

In the call, Macron "under-

scored the risks for Belarus of allowing itself to be dragged into Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine," according to a presidential aide in the French leader's office who spoke on condition of anonymity in accordance with the presidential palace's practices.

Macron also spoke Sunday with Zelenskyy.

A terse readout released by the Belarusian presidential press service said that the call took place "on the French side's initiative" and that the two leaders discussed "regional issues" and the relations of Belarus with the European Union and France.

**Russia fires hypersonic missile at Ukraine**

Sunday's heavy bombardment included Russia's powerful hypersonic Oreshnik ballistic missile, which can carry multiple warheads. Russian President Vladimir Putin has boasted that it can travel up to 10 times the speed of sound and evade air defence systems.

Zelenskyy said Ukrainian intelligence services had received tips-off from the United States and European countries that Russia was preparing to launch an Oreshnik. In addition to the two deaths, at least 87 people were wounded in Kyiv, including three children, in the barrage, Zelenskyy said Monday. Twenty-one people were hos-

pitalised.

The intense assault damaged buildings across the city, including near government offices, residential buildings, schools and a market, Ukrainian authorities said. Shattered glass still littered sidewalks on Monday.

"Every such strike only demonstrates yet again the true nature of Putin's regime — the regime that doesn't recognise human life, international law, or borders," Tsikhanouskaya, the Belarusian opposition leader in exile, wrote on Telegram after witnessing the attack's aftermath in Kyiv.

**In other developments, Monday:**

Russia's Federal Security Service said that divers found magnetic mines attached to the hull of a liquefied petroleum gas tanker in the Russian Baltic port of Ust-Luga. The tanker Arrhenius was bound for Samsun, Turkey, it said, adding that the limpet mines were made in a NATO member country. Ukrainian officials made no immediate comment.

Meanwhile, a Russian missile hit a business in the northeastern Ukrainian city of Derhachi, killing two people and wounding 19 others, Kharkiv regional administration head Oleh Syniehubov said. Seventeen people were hospitalised. (AP)

## Xi hails China's 'unbreakable' friendship with Pak as he meets PM Shehbaz

**BEIJING/ISLAMABAD, May 25:** Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Monday met Chinese President Xi Jinping, who hailed Beijing's "unbreakable" friendship with Islamabad and commended Pakistan for taking the initiative to play a mediating role in restoring peace in West Asia.

During the meeting at the Great Hall of the People, Xi called Shehbaz an "old friend" and said the two countries "understood, trusted and supported each other" over decades, forging an "unbreakable traditional friendship," according to Dawn newspaper.

"China commends Pakistan for taking the initiative to play a mediating role in restoring peace in the Middle East," Xi told Shehbaz, who was accompanied by Chief of Defence Forces Field Marshal Asim Munir who concluded his visit to Iran on Saturday.

Sharif appreciated China's support for Pakistan in mediating the US-Iran negotiations, noting that President Xi's four propositions on the West Asia situation offer guidance for achieving peace, China's state-run Xinhua news agency reported.

"I know that you have just returned from Iran and made positive efforts for the current peace. We still appreciate the constructive role played by Pakistan," Xi was quoted as saying by Dawn.

Shehbaz called China and Pakistan two "iron brother" countries with a relationship that is "next to none".

Earlier, Shehbaz held talks with Premier Li Qiang during which he called for Islamabad and Beijing to "really be together" in ongoing efforts to restore peace in West Asia.

Speaking at the delegation-level talks with Li at the Great Hall of the People, Shehbaz said that the "world is passing through a very critical moment".

"There is a crisis in the Gulf, and Pakistan has played a very sincere role to mediate between the US and Iran," Shehbaz said, noting that Field Marshal Munir had just re-

turned from Tehran.

"And he (Munir) didn't want to miss this great visit, and he assured me that he will be joining me in this meeting, and he has been travelling throughout the night," said Shehbaz, who arrived in China on Saturday on a four-day official visit as the two all-weather allies celebrated the 75th year of establishment of diplomatic relations.

He highlighted that the army chief "played a very important role back and forth with the Iranian leadership and the American leadership", also mentioning Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar's communications with his regional counterparts.

"We hope and pray to Allah Almighty that peace will be restored forever, and lots of ground has already been covered. Things are moving in the right direction," he said.

He thanked President Xi and the Chinese leadership for their "great support to Pakistan to promote peace and achieve a ceasefire".

## Young men storm Congo hospital treating Ebola patients to demand bodies of their kin

**KINSHASA, May 25:** Angry young men stormed a hospital treating Ebola patients at the heart of the latest outbreak of the disease in eastern Congo on Sunday evening, forcing the medical staff to scramble to evacuate the patients as gunfire rang out in the area.

It was not immediately known if anyone was hurt in the attack on the Mongbwalu General Hospital but Dr Richard Lokudu, the hospital's medical director, told The Associated Press the attackers demanded that two bodies of their kin be handed over to them.

There was gunfire and the medics were trying to evacuate the patients and the staff, Lokudu said over the phone. "Mongbwalu General Hospital is on general alert," he added. He did not have any further details of the unfolding turmoil.

The attack — the third in a week's time on health care facilities where medical workers struggle with lack of resources to treat suspected Ebola cases — undermined the challenges of the outbreak, which the World Health Organization has declared a public health emergency of international concern.

Bodies of those who died of Ebola can be highly contagious and lead to further spread when people prepare them for burial and gather for funerals.

In response to the outbreak, Congolese authorities have mandated that the dangerous work of burying suspected victims be managed wherever possible by authorities, which can be met by protests from families and friends. On Friday, the government said funeral wakes and gatherings of more than 50 people would be

banned in northeastern Congo in an effort to curb the spread of the virus.

On Saturday, a group of residents of Mongbwalu attacked and set fire to a tent set up for suspected and confirmed Ebola cases by the Doctors Without Borders humanitarian group.

During that attack, 18 people with suspected Ebola infections left the facility and were now unaccounted for, Lokudu had said earlier.

On Thursday, another treatment centre, in the town of Rwampara, was burned down after family members were banned from retrieving the body of a local man suspected to have died of Ebola.

WHO has said the outbreak 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. (PTI)

## Outgoing envoy reaffirms India's willingness to deepen ties with B'desh

**DHAKA, May 25:** Outgoing Indian High Commissioner Pranay Verma on Sunday reiterated New Delhi's willingness to enhance "multifaceted" ties with Dhaka in a farewell call on Bangladesh Prime Minister Tarique Rahman.

Verma, a 1994-batch Indian Foreign Service officer, has been appointed as India's next Ambassador to Belgium and the European Union.

He met Rahman, who is also the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) chairman, at the Prime Minister's Office at the Bangladesh Secretariat, according to a social media post by the party.

Rahman thanked Verma for his contributions to bilateral relations and conveyed best wishes for his next assignment, the Indian High Commission in Dhaka said in a post on X.



Verma "reaffirmed India's willingness to deepen multifaceted engagement with Bangladesh for the mutual benefit and shared prosperity of the peoples of both countries," it said.

The two also briefly discussed various potential areas of cooperation driven by the development priorities of the two countries.

Foreign Minister Khalilur Rahman was present at the meeting, according to the BNP's post.

Verma assumed charge as the high commissioner to Dhaka on

September 21, 2022.

He will be replaced by former Union minister Dinesh Trivedi, whose appointment last month came amid efforts by the two countries to repair frayed bilateral ties.

Trivedi is expected to take up the assignment shortly, according to India's Ministry of External Affairs.

New Delhi's decision to send a seasoned politician to Dhaka comes at a time when both sides are looking to rebuild relations that came under severe strain during the tenure of Bangladesh's interim government headed by Muhammad Yunus.

Verma played a role in initiating efforts to reset the ties after the new BNP government led by PM Rahman came to power in February. (PTI)

## 15 killed after lorry overturns in central B'desh



**DHAKA, May 25:** At least 15 people were killed and 10 others injured as a lorry loaded with iron rods overturned on a major highway in central Bangladesh early on Monday.

"The accident occurred on the eastern side of the Jamuna Bridge that connects northwestern Bangladesh with the central part," local fire station in charge, Ataur Rahman, told reporters.

He said the 10 injured were shifted to a local health facility for treatment with help from the people in neighbouring areas.

According to local police, the lorry was also carrying some passengers along with iron rods. The driver lost control of the vehicle, and it overturned in the Kalihati sub-district of Tangail in central

Bangladesh.

Tangail's Additional Superintendent of Police, Fauzia Habib Khan, said the lorry or truck was heading toward the northwestern region from the southeastern port city of Chattogram, and the victims might have boarded it from different points on the way during the Eid rush. The tragic incident took place even as a 10-day vacation of Eid-ul-Adha began on Monday. People have started to rush to their hometowns for the festival, jamming buses, trains and ferries.

The poor travel in lorries for low cost or after failing to get tickets in regular passenger vehicles.

Police, however, said the identities of the 15 people could not be known immediately, and efforts were underway to identify them.

Bangladesh has one of the highest road crash fatality rates in the world, with accidents generally attributed to reckless driving, unfit vehicles and often poor road conditions. According to a 2021 World Health Organisation (WHO) estimate, road crashes kill some 32,000 Bangladeshis every year. (PTI)

**MECCA, May 25:** The annual Hajj pilgrimage, one of the Five Pillars of Islam, officially began Monday.

More than 1.5 million pilgrims have arrived in Saudi Arabia from outside the country, Saleh bin Saad Al-Murabba, commander of the Hajj passport forces, said Friday.

The faithful have been pouring into the country for the Hajj against the backdrop of a tenuous ceasefire in the Iran war and related regional tensions and uncertainty.

Egyptian pilgrim Samya Abdul Moneim said she was grateful to God that she made it to the Hajj, which is required once in a lifetime of every Muslim who can afford it and is physically able to make it.

"I am in a state of blessing and happiness," she said in Mecca on Sunday. "It's an indescribable feeling, truly. I mean, thank God, I am in a blessing."

Typically on the first day, many

pilgrims in Mecca converge on a vast tent camp in the nearby desert. Ahead of that, pilgrims have been circling the cube-shaped Kaaba in the Grand Mosque in sweltering temperatures. For pilgrims, Hajj can be a deeply moving spiritual experience and a chance to seek God's forgiveness and the erasure of past sins. Pilgrims perform the Hajj rituals over several days.

This Hajj "is, in effect, a hard reset for me," Youssef Chouhoud, a political scientist at Christopher Newport University in Virginia, said Monday from the tent city of Mina. "I pray that I emerge on the other side of this journey with a new sense of purpose and the discipline to see it through."

Around him, many pilgrims were resting and refuelling, he said via WhatsApp, noting how demanding the pilgrimage is.

"It is for many pilgrims the most difficult thing they will ever do in their lives," he said. "But nothing this meaningful is ever going to be



easy."

He found it inspiring "to see so many who have sacrificed so much to be here ... only to compete with one another in giving charity and helping each other along the way," he said. "All this in the hope that their intentions and actions may be accepted by their Lord."

**Pilgrims brave intense heat**

Many spend years hoping and praying to one day perform the Hajj or saving up money and waiting for a permit to embark on the trip.

As they brave the intense heat to perform religious rituals, many pilgrims have been using umbrellas for shade and carrying handheld fans. Volunteers hand out water

bottles to help them stay hydrated and fans spray fine mists of water.

On Saturday, US President Donald Trump said a deal with Iran on the war, including opening the Strait of Hormuz, has been "largely negotiated" after calls with Israel and other allies in the region. He described it as a "Memorandum of Understanding pertaining to PEACE" that still must be finalized by the United States, Iran and the other countries that participated in the calls. That capped a week in which the U.S. weighed a new round of attacks on Iran.

Ahead of the trip for Hajj, some have said they were leaning on their faith as they embark on the journey amid the tensions and that they were feeling immense gratitude for the opportunity to go.

Hajj brings together large numbers of Muslims of diverse races, ethnicities, languages and economic classes, creating a sense of unity for many. (AP)

CM urges people to avoid violent agitations

## Manipur govt committed to strengthening police force to maintain peace: CM

**IMPHAL, May 25:** Manipur Chief Minister Y Khemchand Singh on Monday said his government is committed to strengthening the police force to maintain peace in the state that has witnessed ethnic violence for about three years and urged people to refrain from violent agitations.

Speaking at an event on the occasion of flagging off 477 new vehicles for the state police, he asserted that it would be difficult to bring peace to Manipur without a strong police force.

Singh said, "Manipur Police personnel took a big responsibility in controlling and preventing the violence in the state and even sacrificed their lives. Army, Assam Rifles, CRPF, BSF and all other security agencies also took equal responsibility in maintaining the law and order situation following the unfortunate violence in the state."

More than 260 people have been killed and thousands rendered



homeless in ethnic violence between Meiteis and Kuki-Zo groups since May 2023.

The government is committed to providing "maximum support to strengthen the police force", the CM said.

gaging in talks. I appeal to all not to engage in violent activities," the chief minister said.

Later in a post on X, Singh said, "Flagged off 477 police vehicles at the 1st MR Parade Ground today in the presence of Home Minister K Govindas Singh, MLAs, Commissioner (Home) DGP, and senior police officials."

The vehicles procured for the Manipur Police are part of a scheme for the modernisation of police, he said.

"Today is a historic moment for the state... This significant augmentation of police mobility and operational capacity will strengthen law enforcement and enhance public service delivery across the state," he said.

"The Government of Manipur remains firmly committed to equipping the police force with modern resources and infrastructure to ensure effective policing, public safety, and the maintenance of law and order," he added. (PTI)

"During an agitation following the killing of two children in a bomb attack at Tronglaobi in Bishnupur district, there had been instances when certain youths had targeted security forces, instead of pursuing peaceful rallies and en-

## Rio hails NDPP-NPF merger as historic milestone

NPF president calls for unity, discipline, and renewed commitment to the Naga cause

HT Bureau

**GUWAHATI, May 25:** State Chief Minister and president of the Naga People's Front, Dr Neiphiu Rio, on Monday expressed profound happiness over the formal approval and acceptance of the NDPP-NPF merger by the Election Commission of India, as per the ECI Order dated May 4, 2026.

Following this approval, the NPF stands certified by the ECI as a unified regional party, with the erstwhile Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party ceasing to exist as a separate political entity.

Addressing the party ticket distribution ceremony for the Town Council Bye-Elections 2026, NPF President Dr Rio urged all party workers to embrace this moment as a "golden period" in the history of the NPF and rededicate themselves to the service of the Naga people.

Expressing personal satisfaction on returning to his original political home, Dr Rio stated, "I am very comfortable to be back with the NPF — the party that has always stood as the true custodian of Naga rights and identity."

He asserted that the NPF was formed with the sole purpose of fighting for the rights, identity and dignity of the Naga people. Every member must take pride in this legacy and work with sincerity for the Nagas.

"The party is proud that generations of prominent and legendary Naga leaders have served the people through the NPF, and the party has made countless sacrifices to



uphold Naga identity and rights," he said.

As leaders and members of the NPF, Dr Rio said, "We must place the interest of the people above individual interests. The bounden duty of the party is to serve the Naga interest, not personal gain."

He also informed that the NPF is bound by its Constitution and every member, upon joining, pledges to abide by it. The Constitution of the party mandates faithfulness in serving the people, he added.

"This is a time for renewal," Dr Rio urged, adding that all leaders must equip and educate themselves on the aims and objectives of the NPF so that they continue to stand firmly for the cause of the Naga people. Dr Rio also urged Municipal Councillors to prioritise public interest and strictly adhere to party guidelines in all their work and not create any misunderstanding among themselves.

He further called upon party workers to move forward with unity, discipline and a renewed commitment to the Naga cause, ensuring that the NPF remains the

authentic voice of the Naga people.

MLA and NPF Secretary General Achumbemo Kikon, while introducing the candidates, urged all three candidates to abide by the party Constitution and serve the people. Expressing his happiness over the receipt of the long-awaited official letter from the ECI confirming the merger, he said that all official formalities regarding the NDPP-NPF merger had been completed.

The three NPF candidates contesting the bye-elections to the ULBs — Neichüü Kuotsu of Chümoukedima Town Ward No 11, Shikavi Kiba of Atoizu Town Ward No. 9 and Ar Aling Lotha of Wokha Town Ward No. 8 — were administered the oath by Working President Pusazo Loruo.

Earlier, the programme was chaired by Senior vice president Khongjah Konyak. The invocation prayer was led by working president Ahoivi Zhimoi, while the ticket dedicatory prayer was offered by State Chaplain Rev Izieteiling Terieng. The vote of thanks was proposed by Senior vice president N Bendang Jamir.

### Four militants arrested in Manipur

**IMPHAL, May 25:** Security forces have arrested four militants belonging to different proscribed outfits in Manipur's Churachandpur and Imphal East districts, a police statement said on Monday.

Two cadres of the United Kuki National Army (UKNA) were arrested from Ngehathal area under the jurisdiction of Churachandpur police station on Friday. They were identified as Thongpi Guite (33) and Shokhomang Baite (40).

One AK-47 rifle with a magazine, a 9mm pistol with a magazine, 31 cartridges of different calibres and two grenades were seized from their possession.

Meanwhile, two insurgents of Manipur Revolutionary Army (MRA) were apprehended from Wangkhei Ayanpalli Road on Saturday.

They are identified as Ningthoujam Vicky Singh alias Munal and Ningthoujam Ishworchandra Singh. Three mobile phones, an Aadhaar card and a two-wheeler were seized from the duo. (PTI)

## Mizo students protest over re-employment of retired official

**AIZAWL, May 25:** Members of Mizoram's influential student organisation, Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP), on Monday gheraoed the tourism office here in protest against the re-employment of the department's director following her superannuation in April.

The protesting students also prevented the director and other staff from attending office.

On Saturday, the MZP had accused Chief Minister Lalduhoma of blatant favouritism over the re-employment of R. Lalrodingi as tourism director despite a written assurance from him that the government would review her re-employment.

Lalrodingi, who retired as the additional director in the commerce and industries, and geology and mining departments on April 30, was re-employed by the government, giving dual charges as tourism director as well as Officer on Special Duty (OSD) to the CM with effect from May 1 through an order issued on April 24.

However, on May 15, the government cancelled the order and decided that she would continue only as OSD after the MZP met Lalduhoma and urged him to rescind her re-engagement as



tourism director on May 13.

The government changed its decision again on May 22 and ordered that Lalrodingi would take the additional charge as director of tourism with immediate effect.

Expressing disappointment over the latest order, MZP president C Lalremruata claimed the chief minister had given them false assurances when they met him on May 13 to object to the government's move to re-employ Lalrodingi as the tourism director.

He said the CM had promised them to review re-employment through a written commitment.

Lalremruata said while the organisation has no say in Lalrodingi's appointment as OSD as it was a political move, it vehemently opposed her re-engagement

as tourism director.

He said the MZP has been strongly opposed to the re-employment of retired officials as it blocks promotional avenues for serving officials and job opportunities for educated youth.

Meanwhile, Health Minister Lalrinpui, who previously held the tourism portfolio, defended the government's decision to re-engage Lalrodingi, citing that her services were desperately needed.

She said the bureaucrat, who once worked under the North Eastern Council (NEC) in-charge of tourism and also held the post of state tourism director for a brief period before her retirement, was an efficient official and expert in securing central funds. (PTI)

## 5,406 communal posts identified, 3,200 taken down after ethnic violence erupted: Manipur DGP

**IMPHAL, May 25:** Manipur Director General of Police (DGP) Rajiv Singh on Monday said 5,406 sensitive, violent and communal posts have been identified and around 3,200 taken down since June 2023, a month after ethnic violence erupted, while 187 pages and accounts have been blocked.

He said the action was taken in coordination with the state IT Department and the Centre's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY).

Speaking at a programme in which 477 police vehicles, including armoured cars and two-wheelers, were flagged off by Chief Minister Y Khemchand Singh at the 1st Manipur Rifles Ground, the DGP said, "Since June 1, 2023, a total of 5,406 sensitive, violent and communal posts were identified, and around 3,200 posts were taken down in coordination with the state IT department and MeitY. A total of 187 pages and accounts were also blocked."

The DGP said prevention, monitoring and verification of fake news and misinformation were needed to ensure public order.

"The social media outreach of Manipur Police, which clears doubts and issues clarifications, has also expanded significantly. Its Facebook followers have increased to 79,000 and X followers to 27,000," the officer said.

"When I took charge as the DGP of Manipur Police in June 2023, the state was passing through one of the most difficult and challenging times in its history due to the violence between two communities," he said.

The situation demanded not only immediate operational response but also long-term institutional strengthening of the police force. A comprehensive plan of modernisation of police was prepared and sent to the state government towards the end of 2023, the DGP said.

He said on October 31, 2025, the Ministry of Home Affairs approved an amount of ₹ 196.61 crore for strengthening security, infrastructure, mobility, forensics, communication systems and also for smart policing initiatives.

"The central government's support has significantly enhanced the operational capability of Manipur Police and strengthened our ability to respond effectively to emerging security challenges. The vehicles flagged off today will improve mobility, response time and logistical support across both hill and valley districts," the DGP said.

Of the newly procured vehicles, 54 per cent will be sent to the hill districts and the remaining will be in the valley and with technical units of the police, he said.

Recognising the importance of capacity building, Manipur Police entered into a memorandum of understanding with the National Security Guards in June 2025 for specialised training and capacity enhancement, he said.

"To combat extortion activities, a dedicated integrated anti-extortion cell was established and to date, more than 1,000 extortionists have been arrested, both in hills and valley districts," he said. He said during operations against extortion and anti-social elements, there have been instances where protests have been organised, roads blocked and security forces obstructed from performing their lawful duties.

Such actions are detrimental to society as extortionists and anti-social elements are obstacles to peace, progress, education and the future of the youth, the DGP said.

"I appeal to the public to extend maximum cooperation to security forces," he said. (PTI)

## Exempt church vehicles from ban on displaying signage: Church body

HT Correspondent

**DIMAPUR, May 25:** The Christian Forum Dimapur (CFD) has urged the Nagaland government to exempt officially registered church vehicles from restrictions on displaying church names and signage.

On May 9, the state government issued a notification banning the display of religious or NGO-based slogans, signage, stickers and other unauthorised identifiers on both private and public vehicles unless specifically permitted under the Motor Vehicles Act and Rules.

In a letter to the chief minister and the transport commissioner, the forum said church vehicles in Na-

galand serve far beyond transportation and often function as lifelines during emergencies, outreach missions and humanitarian work.

It said Nagaland, being a Christian-majority state, has churches deeply involved in education, health-care, social welfare, peace missions and humanitarian assistance, making church vehicles important tools for public service.

It sought to highlight that church vehicles are regularly used for pastoral visits, transporting the sick, carrying relief materials, conducting peace missions during conflicts and serving remote villages.

Retail leaders discuss expansion, consumer behaviour and growth opportunities across the Northeast

## RAI North East Retail Summit 2026 Concludes in Guwahati

HT Bureau

**GUWAHATI, May 25:** The Retailers Association of India (RAI) successfully hosted the fourth edition of the North East Retail Summit 2026 in Guwahati, further strengthening its focus on advancing the retail landscape in the region. Over the years, the summit has evolved into a key platform for industry stakeholders to exchange ideas, discuss market trends and explore growth opportunities across the region.

The summit brought together retail professionals, entrepreneurs and business leaders from the seven Northeastern states — Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram — with discussions centred around strengthening the regional retail ecosystem, addressing market-specific challenges and identifying new avenues for organised retail expansion.

Kumar Rajagopalan, Executive Director and CEO, Retailers Association of India, speaking on the retail landscape in Northeast India, said, "The Northeast has become one of the most important chapters in India's consumption story. Several states in this region are remarkably advanced in their outlook and that shows up directly in purchasing behaviour. E-retail penetration here already runs 1.2 times the national average and the Korean beauty and fashion influence is a documented shift in how the Northeast consumer defines aspiration. What makes this region



genuinely compelling is its diversity. Consumption patterns change every hundred kilometres. It tells you this is a market with texture, with specificity and with consumers who know exactly what they want. The region rewards retailers who localise seriously and think globally."

The 2026 edition of the summit featured an esteemed line-up of speakers who deliberated on topics such as One Region, Seven Markets — Why a Single Northeast Strategy Will Fail You; The Real Unit Economics — What Profitability Actually Looks Like in the Region; Trust is Not a Soft Metric — How Local Community Relationships Determine Retail Outcomes; and The Northeast Consumer on Their Own Terms — Aspiration, Identity and What They're Actually Buying.

Retail leaders from the region speaking at the summit included Vikram Bothra, MD & CEO, Chandan Retail (Askaran Binraj) and Chairman, RAI — North East Chapter; Kunal Mordani, Director, Tanishkaa Retail Pvt. Ltd.; Anirban Gupta, Managing Director — East India, Colliers India; Raja Gohain, Director, MG Solutions (Times Square); Gaurav Sureka, Founder, Maa Kamakhya Retail and Shop N Save; Sandeep Jalan, Director, Sohumi Shoppe and Arita Kashyap, Founder & CEO, Doyna, among others.

Vikram Bothra, MD & CEO, Chandan Retail Pvt. Ltd. and Chairman, Northeast Retail Chapter, RAI, said, "I've watched this region for years and what's different now isn't just the roads or the airports, though that matters. What's different is the confi-

## Need to strengthen grassroots-level activities to effectively implement welfare schemes: Rijju

**ITANAGAR, May 25:** Union minister Kiren Rijju on Monday called upon BJP workers to work with dedication, discipline and a clear vision to ensure the all-round development of Arunachal Pradesh, while stressing the need to strengthen grassroots-level activities and effectively implement welfare schemes for the benefit of the people.

Addressing party leaders and workers during the Deendayal Upadhyaya Prashikshan Maha Abhiyan, organised for Lower Siang and Leparada districts at Basar, Rijju, the Union Minority and Parliamentary Affairs minister said the BJP governments at the Centre and in the state have ushered in significant development and launched several public welfare initiatives aimed at improving the lives of citizens. He urged party workers to remain committed to the party's ideology and actively contribute towards taking developmental programmes to the grassroots level, an official communique said here. "The responsibility of party workers is not limited to organisational activities alone. They must ensure that government welfare schemes and developmental programmes reach every section of society in a timely and effective manner," Rijju said. (PTI)

The Northeast retailer today is thinking in terms of expansion, not survival. The consumer across these seven states has always been sophisticated, always aspirational. What's changed is that the ecosystem around them — the supply chains, the formats and the investment appetite is finally catching up. We're not at the beginning of this story. We're at the part where it gets interesting."

Siddharth Jalan, Managing Director, Sohumi Shoppe, said, "The Northeast consumer is not waiting for the rest of India to validate what they already know they want. This is a region where Korean beauty, Korean fashion and East Asian aesthetics aren't niche interests — they are mainstream purchasing behaviour. The consumer here arrived at that preference organically, ahead of the national curve and organised retail is only now beginning to respond with the seriousness it deserves."

As the Northeast continues to evolve as a promising retail frontier, NERS 2026 has further cemented its place as a catalyst for industry growth, partnership-building and regional development. The summit was co-powered by Infinity, while the Gold Partners were Askaran Binraj and Sohumi. The Retailers Association of Assam was the Ecosystem Partner, TRRAIN was the Charity Partner, Storai was the Magazine Partner and Replenish was the Digital Marketing Partner.

## Article 370 abrogation triggered development, mindset change in J-K: Jitendra Singh

JAMMU, May 25: Union minister Jitendra Singh said that the abrogation of Article 370 ushered in a new era of development in Jammu and Kashmir and brought about a significant change in the mindset of the people by making them equal citizens of India.

Addressing a training camp under the Pandit Deendayal Upadhyay Prashikshan Mahabhiyan-2026 at Lakhampur in Kathua district on Sunday, Singh also highlighted the changes witnessed in the Union territory under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the past 12 years.

The removal of Article 370 not only accelerated developmental activities but also instilled a renewed sense of self-confidence, self-esteem and aspirations among the people of Jammu and Kashmir, Singh, who represents the Udhampur Lok Sabha constituency in J-K, said.

On August 5, 2019, the government of India revoked the special status granted to Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 of the Constitution, bringing it fully under the constitutional framework of India. It also bifurcated it into two Union territories - J-K and Ladakh.

"Over the last few years, young boys and girls from Jammu and Kashmir have overcome their fears and excelled in various fields across the country," Singh said.

The minister also pointed out



that while interviews for several Central government jobs were abolished across the country in 2016 to ensure transparency, the reform could not be implemented in Jammu and Kashmir due to Article 370.

Referring to the Shahpur Kandi Barrage Project, the minister said it deserved special mention as it remained stalled for nearly four decades despite then-prime minister Indira Gandhi laying its foundation in 1984.

"Successive Congress governments left the project files untouched and failed to take it forward," he told reporters.

Prime Minister Modi, at a public rally in Jammu in February 2019, announced the revival of the project, which had long been a demand

of the people, he said.

"Today, the Shahpur Kandi Barrage Project has been completed. Very soon, another major multi-purpose project, which had remained stalled for nearly a century, is also expected to become operational," he said.

The revival of such projects would not only boost irrigation and agricultural productivity but also strengthen security by checking infiltration routes that had earlier been exploited from across the border, he added.

Recalling the significance of Kathua, Singh said the district has remained an integral part of the ideological journey of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and later the Bharatiya Janata Party.

He described the region as the

"Karmabhoomi" of Syama Prasad Mookerjee and said the movement launched by him for democracy and nationalism had deep roots in the area.

"Kathua has remained the very soul of this journey. Remembering that legacy, we dedicate ourselves to the ideals and development vision pursued under Prime Minister Modi's leadership," he said.

Highlighting the development initiatives in the district, the minister said Kathua now has a medical college, an engineering college, and north India's first homeopathy college and industrial biotech park.

A biodigester facility has also been established in the district, he added. Singh also said a statue of Syama Prasad Mookerjee had been installed for the first time in the area, while a gateway dedicated to Maharaja Gulab Singh has also been built.

The establishment of a passport office and other institutions reflected the pace of development in the district, Singh said.

He also claimed that Jammu and Kashmir has witnessed unprecedented infrastructure growth, with nearly 200 bridges constructed jointly by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) and the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI), including landmark projects such as the Atal Setu and several cable-stayed bridges. (PTI)

## Three AIADMK rebel MLAs resign, set to join TVK

CHENNAI, May 25: The AIADMK suffered another blow on Monday when three of its party legislators belonging to the rebel group led by senior leaders C Ve Shanmugam and S P Velumani resigned and are set to join the ruling TVK, prompting "horse-trading" charges from the opposition DMK and AIADMK.

AIADMK chief Edappadi K Palaniswami lashed out at the "fraud jobs" of the TVK government and said such things were new to Tamil Nadu politics. He called the resignation episode a "pre-planned conspiracy."

The development comes weeks after the AIADMK lost the April 23 polls, the fourth major drubbing since 2019, its MLAs split into two groups, each supporting party general secretary Palaniswami and the Shanmugam-Velumani duo. The two camps took divergent positions on the TVK government's floor test, with the Palaniswami faction voting against it and the 25-member group on the other side backing the C Joseph Vijay-led government which won the confidence vote.

With Speaker JCD Prabhakar accepting the resignation of the three MLAs, the strength of the AIADMK has dropped to 44 from 47 in the 234-member Assembly. The Speaker said the EC will be communicated on the resignation.

Soon after meeting the Speaker, the three legislators--Maragatham Kumaravel, P Sathyabama and S Jayakumar, met senior TVK leader and PWD minister Aadhav Arjuna. Kumaravel said "we are going to join TVK in Panayur (party hq)," later in the day.

The Speaker accepted the resignation of the three legislators -- Kumaravel, who won from Madurantakam, Sathyabama from Dharapuram, and Jayakumar, who got elected from Perundurai Assembly constituency -- on AIADMK tickets.

Meanwhile, five MLAs from the Shanmugam-Velumani camp went back to party chief Palaniswami. When reporters sought his response over the developments, Shanmugam only said "we will talk later."

The three AIADMK MLAs called on the Speaker at the Secretariat here and submitted their resignations. Dharapuram (Tiruppur) and Perundurai (Erode) are part of AIADMK's traditional stronghold, the 'kongu' region in western Tamil Nadu. Madurantakam is located near Chennai.

Shortly thereafter, they met Aadhav Arjuna at his chamber.

The three were among the 25 legislators who voted in support of the C Joseph Vijay-led TVK government during the May 13 floor test, defying the party diktat.

Meanwhile, the five AIADMK MLAs who had been in the Shanmugam-Velumani camp, shifted their allegiance back to party chief Palaniswami. With this, the num-



ber of Palaniswami-supporting MLAs in the Assembly has risen to 27. The legislators who left the Velumani camp included S M Sukumar (Arcot).

With three resignations and five MLAs going back to the Palaniswami camp, the strength of the rebel side has now reduced to 17, from 25. With the Speaker accepting the resignations, Tamil Nadu will witness byelections to four Assembly constituencies including the Tiruchirappalli East vacated by Vijay.

Speaker Prabhakar told reporters that the three AIADMK MLAs' resignation was accepted since they were in proper format, as per laid down procedures. "There is no need to mention the reason to step down," he said in a response to a question.

The resignation and split in the AIADMK has come within 21 days of declaration of Assembly election results. Post poll, this is a major jolt for the AIADMK. The DMK too has suffered a setback with its allies the Congress, VCK and IUML joining the TVK government and the Left parties extending their support to the Vijay-led dispensation.

Amidst a speculation of a rapprochement between the AIADMK factions, the five legislators who had supported Shanmugam, called on Palaniswami at his Greenways Road residence here and merged themselves with the party.

Later, the group met Prabhakar and submitted a letter stating that they would function under the leadership of Palaniswami.

"We gave a letter to our general secretary expressing regrets over some mistakes during the floor test in the Assembly. We said all five of us will function under his leadership and returned to the AIADMK," Sukumar said.

The other MLAs are-- P Haribaskar from Anthiyur, Dilipan Jaisankar from Sankarankoil, N S N Natarajan from Kangayam, and K Mohan from Panruti.

Responding to the resignation of the three MLAs, Palaniswami claimed while their resignation letters were accepted in the ground floor of the Secretariat, "they were handed over membership cards at the hands of a minister in the first

floor." "This has exposed the pre-planned conspiracy, a horse-trading," he said in a statement.

AIADMK has braved many "back-stabbings," and "betrayals" to serve the public, he said.

In veiled reference to the rebel camp, he said they had won since people voted against the "cinema celebrity's symbol," in an apparent reference to Vijay, and his party symbol 'whistle'.

"People will soon teach a lesson to those riding on others' shoulders," he added. DMK President M K Stalin also lashed out at the TVK saying there was "horse-trading" in "horse-speed."

He slammed the TVK for initially seeking DMK allies' support for government formation, "luring a section of AIADMK MLAs to vote in its favour and making some of them resign as MLAs and making them join the party in Secretariat itself."

From calling themselves as "pure force," TVK has turned into a "grief force," and did the people vote to witness such "nonsense," Stalin asked in a social media post.

Meanwhile, AIADMK MP and the party's Advocates Wing Secretary, IS Inbadurai, called the resignation of the three MLAs and their "having joined" TVK as "horse-trading."

Everything, "including giving them TVK membership cards," happened in a hurry and haste, he said in a post on 'X'.

DMK MP P Wilson also slammed the TVK.

"Within 21 days, three elected MLAs charged with defection resigned and immediately joined the TVK party at the Secretariat premises to evade the anti-defection law. It is highly condemnable that the Government Secretariat premises and chambers have become places to join a political party, and all ethics and conduct have been cast aside," the Rajya Sabha member P Wilson said.

"Elections are now being forcibly imposed on the people of these three constituencies for personal political gain, and a significant amount of public money and time is likely to be wasted on another by-election, which normally must be held within six months," he said in the social media post. (PTI)

## Fuel cess under review, no final decision yet: Kerala CM Satheesan

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, May 25: Kerala Chief Minister V D Satheesan on Monday said the government has not yet taken a final decision on whether to withdraw the cess on petrol and diesel, as fuel prices continue to remain high.

Speaking to reporters, he said the matter is still under detailed review. "What we are doing now is closely examining the issue because we are not in a position to take a final decision yet. The situation is evolving every day," he said.

During the Left rule in Kerala, a cess was levied on petrol and diesel as part of the state's effort to raise additional revenue amid rising fiscal needs.

At that time, Satheesan, the then Leader of Opposition, had strongly demanded its withdrawal, arguing that it increased the burden on ordinary consumers and worsened fuel price pressures.

Satheesan said on Monday that his government is assessing both revenue implications and the impact on ordinary people before moving ahead.

"We are carefully monitoring factors such as how much tax revenue is being generated and how much burden it is placing on ordinary people," he added. He said the situation is being reviewed regularly, and decisions cannot be made based on daily changes.

"Therefore, a definite decision can only be taken once a final conclusion is reached," he said.

He added that the issue remains under examination and a decision will be taken only after a full assessment is completed.

Meanwhile, Leader of Opposition Pinarayi Vijayan said the UDF, which had staged protests while in the opposition demanding a reduction in state taxes, is now in power. Vijayan, in a statement, said the people of the state were eager to know what steps the UDF government would take to implement its own stand, raise its voice against the central government and reduce taxes.

Alleging that the Centre was once again burdening the people by increasing petrol and diesel prices, Vijayan said imposing fuel price hikes despite a fall in Brent crude prices amounted to "daylight robbery". (PTI)

## 'Mehangai manav' strikes again: Congress slams PM on fuel hike

NEW DELHI, May 25: The Congress on Monday launched a scathing attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the latest fuel hike, with Rahul Gandhi alleging that the "mehangai manav" has struck again and he has just one job of making promises during elections and attacking people's pockets at other times.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge also lashed out at the Modi government over the issue and asked who is benefitting from this "daily robbery".

Petrol and diesel prices were raised by ₹ 2.61-2.71 per litre on Monday, marking the fourth increase in less than two weeks as state-owned fuel retailers continued to pass on rising international oil prices to consumers. In a post in Hindi on X, Gandhi said, "Mehangai manav Modi strikes again. He raises petrol and diesel prices in installments - ensuring that your pockets are quietly picked."

"For months, I had been warning of an impending economic storm. But Modi Ji, true to form, was busy with elections at the time and the moment the elections ended, he hiked the prices of petrol

and diesel by Rs 8," the leader of opposition in the Lok Sabha said.

And, this upward trend will only continue, he claimed.

"Mehangai manav' Modi has just one job: promises during elections, and attacking people's pockets at other times," Gandhi said.

Congress president Kharge alleged that the Modi government has looted ₹43 lakh crore in the last 12 years.

"The Daily Assault of FUEL LOOT is not over yet! 4th hike in 10 days!! Petrol ₹ 7.35/litre, Diesel ₹ 7.53/litre. The Modi government has sprinkled petrol to burn the savings of common people," he said in a post on X.

He pointed out that between 2004 and 2014, during the UPA rule, international crude oil prices increased by 175.34 per cent, while during the Modi government, "not even a single cent" of international crude oil prices have increased.

"Despite that, the Modi government has hiked the petrol prices from ₹ 71.41 per litre in 2014 to ₹ 102.12 per litre in 2026, a rise of 43.01 per cent, and diesel prices from ₹ 56.71 per litre to ₹ 95.20

per litre, an increase of 67.87 per cent," Kharge said.

The Modi government has looted ₹ 43 lakh crore in the last 12 years, making it a loot of ₹ 1,000 everyday, he alleged.

"With the 4th time rise in Petrol and Diesel prices, today the shares of HPCL, BPCL and IOC rose by 5.8%, 4.44% and 3.90% respectively. Profit over People is BJP's DNA!" the Congress chief said.

"Every fuel price hike is another blow to household budgets, and has a cascading effect on every aspect of the economy. From Farmers to MSMEs, every strata of the society bears the brunt of BJP's LOOT," he alleged.

"We repeat. Who is benefitting from this DAILY ROBBERY?" Kharge said in his post.

Addressing a press conference, Congress spokesperson Ragini Nayak said a few days ago, Narendra Modi was stating at an election rally that there is no oil crisis in the country and there would be no inflation. "Amit Shah was also singing the same tune, and Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri was also stating that our oil reserves are full." (PTI)

## BJP counters Rahul Gandhi, says Modi averted fuel shortage in India amid global crisis

NEW DELHI, May 25: The BJP on Monday slammed Rahul Gandhi for his comments on the recent spree of fuel price hikes, accusing the Congress leader of attempting to undermine the country.

This response followed Gandhi's scathing attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the latest fuel hike, in which he said 'mehangai manav' has struck again, stating that Modi's only role is to make promises during elections while attacking people's pockets at other times.

Petrol and diesel prices were raised by ₹ 2.61-2.71 per litre on Monday, marking the fourth increase in less than two weeks as state-owned fuel retailers continued to pass on rising international oil prices to consumers.

Reacting sharply to Gandhi's remarks, BJP national spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia called the Congress leader "foolish, immature, and anarchic," alleging that "the leader of the opposition is attempting to weaken the country."

Bhatia highlighted that oil and diesel prices have surged significantly worldwide; however, India's price increases have been modest in comparison, particularly when viewed along-

side those in the US, UK, and Gulf nations.

"Rahul Gandhi, if your motive is to spread anarchy, we are also determined to make India stronger," the BJP spokesperson told a press conference at the party headquarters here.

He added that India is effectively addressing this global challenge under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, emphasising that the country's economy is strong and that the people support the Modi government.

Bhatia claimed that petrol prices have risen by 58 per cent in Malaysia, 46 per cent in the US, 34 per cent in Canada, 25 per cent in China, and 20 per cent in the UK, while in India, they have only increased by 5.5 per cent thus far.

"For nearly 65 to 70 days, a war-like situation persisted, yet in India, petrol prices did not rise even by ₹1. The primary reason for this was the government's intent that no burden should fall on the common man," he said.

Bhatia said the government took "concrete steps" in the interest of the people of India, while oil companies "accepted" the losses. It was ensured that the common people did not suffer, he added.

"Another important truth is that, even after 75 days, there is no shortage of petrol and diesel in the country, and these fuels remain available in the market. While there is a global crisis regarding gas, India has prioritised domestic gas, ensuring its availability," the BJP spokesperson said. Bhatia mentioned that over the past 80 days, inflation has sharply increased in many countries, while in India it has remained around 4 per cent. This, he claimed, is proof of the effective management of the country's economy under Prime Minister Modi's leadership.

"Rahul Gandhi and Mallikarjun Kharge should see all this. It is not right to be blinded by hatred," he added.

Bhatia also criticised Gandhi over his reported remark that the Modi government will fall within a year, alleging that the Congress leader is talking about "ending democracy and the entire system" because he cannot come to power through democratic means. "Rahul Gandhi, who is already the 'Bhasmasur' of Indian politics, has now become an astrologer and started predicting the future of the governments as well," the BJP spokesperson said. (PTI)

## Telangana govt procures paddy though Centre not extending cooperation: CM



HYDERABAD, May 25: Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy on Monday said the state government is purchasing paddy from farmers though the Centre is not "cooperating" in the process.

During an interaction with CPI leaders who called on him here, he said the state government is procuring maize from farmers though the Centre is not purchasing.

The state government is procuring maize from farmers, though it makes losses in the process, an official release quoted Reddy as saying.

The state has witnessed a good yield of maize during the crop season, he said.

In a separate interaction with CPI(M) leaders who met him, the chief minister alleged that the Centre is not procuring even 30 per cent of the produce from farmers. The Centre should be questioned on this, he said.

Against the backdrop of opposition's attack on the Congress government over the alleged delay in procurement, the CM said there has been a shortage of workers for the procurement process as many of them belong to West Bengal who travelled to their home state for the recent assembly elections.

The procurement is not taken up at the agriculture market yards in the afternoons in view of severe heat, he said.

The state government is purchasing all the produce from farmers, and it is also paying a bonus for a fine variety of paddy, he said.

Observing that the Musi river rejuvenation project will generate large-scale employment and help improve the quality of life in Hyderabad, Reddy said the riverfront would also emerge as a major tourist destination.

The BJP and BRS are playing politics on the Musi development programme, he alleged.

Reddy also said the state government is "cleansing" education in the government sector and that it would be setting up "Telangana Public Schools".

The CPI and CPI(M) leaders thanked the CM for revising the minimum wages of workers recently.

Revanth Reddy on May 21 announced that the government would revise minimum wages and classify workers into four categories based on the recommendations of a Cabinet sub-committee headed by Deputy CM Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka.

The revised minimum wage will take effect on June 1, 2026.

The state has been divided into three zones: Zone 1 comprises municipal corporations, Zone 2 comprises municipalities, and Zone 3 rural areas.

According to Reddy, in zone 1, the minimum wage for unskilled workers has been increased from ₹ 12,750 to ₹ 16,000; for semi-skilled workers, from ₹ 13,152 to ₹ 17,000; for skilled workers, from ₹ 13,772 to ₹ 18,500; and for highly skilled workers, from ₹ 14,607 to ₹ 20,000. (PTI)

## PM pollution increased by 20 pc in Indo-Gangetic Plain, Himalayan region, North-East: Study



NEW DELHI, May 25: The overall particulate matter pollution in the Indo-Gangetic Plain, the Himalayan region, and North-East India increased by more than 20 per cent during the 2010-2019 period compared to the 2000-2009 baseline, according to a new study.

It also revealed that in the eastern Indo-Gangetic Plain, carbonaceous aerosols, particles from the burning of crop residue, wood, and other organic material, showed strong and increasing trends between 2000 and 2024 (the period the study analysed).

According to the study, the sharp rise in particulate matter (PM) in North-East India is attributed to intensified slash-

and-burn agricultural practices and extensive use of biomass for domestic energy in rural households during this period. The study, "Decadal shifts in aerosol hotspots and source attribution over IGP, north-east India and Himalayas: A 25-year (2000-2024) study", was published in the journal Atmospheric Environment and released on Monday.

In a statement, Abhijit Chatterjee, co-author of the study and professor at the Bose Institute in Kolkata, said, "The eastern Indo-Gangetic Plain, and increasingly North-East India, are carrying a disproportionate pollution burden and it is being driven almost entirely by biomass burning. That is the signal that

stands out most clearly across 25 years of data."

The analysis also found that IGP emissions are reaching the Himalayas.

While pollution from Punjab and Delhi affects the western ranges, emissions from Bihar and West Bengal influence the eastern Himalayas.

Soumen Raul, a senior research fellow at the Bose Institute, in a statement, said, "Our trajectory analysis shows that what is emitted in Punjab or Bihar does not stay there. It travels into the mountains. These are ecologically and climatically sensitive zones, and they are currently under the scope of any structured clean air intervention in India." (PTI)

# SC issues notices to Centre on PIL seeking ban on employment of children in orchestra

**NEW DELHI, May 25:** The Supreme Court on Monday sought responses from the Centre, child rights body NCPDR, and the NHRC on a PIL seeking an absolute ban on the employment of children and adolescents in orchestras, dance troupes, massage parlours, and spas.

A bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices Joydalya Bagchi and Vipul M Pancholi took note of the submissions of senior advocate H S Phoolka, appearing for child rights collective 'Just Rights for Children Alliance' (JRCA), and issued the notices to Union ministries of labour and law and justice.

Phoolka argued that minor girls aged 10 and 11 years were being employed in orchestras and dance bars. "For spas and massage parlours, some

states have made rules of 18 years as the minimum age," he said. Terming the situation "serious", the bench also issued notices to the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on the PIL.

"Issue a writ of mandamus or appropriate directions directing the Central Government... to exercise its powers under Section 4 of the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, to include the employment or performance of children below 18 years in orchestras, dance bars, dance troupes, nautanki performances, massage parlours, spas, and salons, or any similar establishments that depict children in obscene or exploitative manner in Part A of the Schedule to



CALPRA, thereby categorically prohibiting such employment," the plea said. The petition alleged that these sectors had evolved into "clandestine fronts" for organised trafficking, sexual exploitation, and forced labour of minor girls across the country.

The petition, filed by the JRCA through Advocate Sonali Jain, highlighted a critical "enforcement vacuum" in the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act (CALPRA), 1986. Under the law, "hazardous" occupations where adolescent labour is strictly prohibited are listed under Part A of the CALPRA Schedule.

However, massage parlours and spas currently fall under Part B, meaning the employment of adolescents (aged 14-18) is merely "regulated" rather than banned.

Furthermore, the "orchestra" and "dance troupe" sectors, notoriously prevalent in states like Bihar and West Bengal, remain entirely unlisted, it said. The PIL said traffickers exploit this statutory ambiguity to disguise the commercial sexual

exploitation of children as "lawful employment" in the entertainment and wellness industries.

It provided data from rescue operations conducted between March 2025 and May 2026 and said 212 minors were rescued from orchestras and dance groups in Bihar and West Bengal. It further said 12 minors were rescued from massage parlours and spas in Delhi and Rajasthan.

The victims, some as young as 12, were lured from impoverished communities with false promises of "glamour," dance training, or film roles, it said. In reality, many were sold to operators for sums ranging from ₹ 10,000 to ₹ 50,000, forced into debt bondage, and compelled to perform in "sexually provocative attire" before intoxicated audiences. (PTI)

## Red Fort blast accused visited Lucknow in August, planned attacks on key city landmarks: NIA

**NEW DELHI, May 25:** The NIA's probe into the Red Fort car blast case has revealed a chilling conspiracy by the accused to carry out a series of terror attacks in Lucknow with targets including legislative assembly and other prominent locations with high footfalls, official sources said on Monday.

They said that two of the key accused -- Dr Muzammil Shakeel and Dr Shaheen Saeed -- travelled from Haryana's Faridabad to Lucknow between August 25 and 30, 2025 as part of a "calculated reconnaissance trip" for this terror conspiracy.

Muzammil conducted hostile reconnaissance of various targets which were symbols of the government in Uttar Pradesh. He receded the general area of Vidhan Sabha, Babu Bhawan (civil secretariat) and areas with high footfalls like Imambara, Lal Bagh and Aminabad, the sources said. The accused persons found these places as suitable targets for their mission. "They were contemplating a plan to explode a car laden with explosives near these building complexes," a source said.

The probe by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) has also found that accused Muzammil used his phone to search chemical shops in Lucknow stocking the two precursor chemicals required to manufacture Triacetone Triperoxide (TATP), the highly unstable peroxide explosive known internationally as the 'Mother of Satan', which was used in the Delhi Red Fort car blast on November 10 last year.

Shaheen, on Muzammil's instructions, copied the names of these relevant shops in her own handwriting -- a list later recovered by the NIA from her phone,

the sources said. The duo stayed at the residence of one of the relatives of Shaheen at Lucknow. Shaheen's ancestral house, where her father lives separately, is located at Khandari Bazar, Lal Bagh, they said.

Muzammil then asked a "witness", who hails from Lucknow and was familiar with the city, to physically enquire at these shops about availability of the chemicals in large quantities, the sources said.

This witness was roped in by Muzammil as he was a local and could make enquiries without raising suspicion, unlike Muzammil who could be immediately identified as an outsider, they said.

According to the sources, the accused persons also searched for a place at a remote location of the city where their explosive-making operations could be carried out in a clandestine manner, in the same way as they were operating in the rented house in Khori Jamalpur in Faridabad. The NIA, through a detailed investigation involving deposition of multiple eye witness accounts and technical analysis, following the financial trail has established the entire sequence of events that transpired during this Lucknow visit.

These findings are part of a voluminous 7,500-page chargesheet filed by the NIA on May 14 in connection with the high-intensity vehicle-borne IED blast that rocked the national capital on November 10 last year.

The anti-terror agency's investigation establishes that the Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGuH) interim terror module -- linked to Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) -- aimed to set up a covert base in Lucknow. (PTI)

## NEET paper leak: NTA has not learnt lessons, says SC; issues notices on pleas

**NEW DELHI, May 25:** It's sad that the NTA has not learnt lessons from the earlier NEET paper leak, the Supreme Court said on Monday as it sought the response of the Centre, NTA and CBI on pleas for the replacement of the testing agency with a robust and autonomous body to conduct the medical entrance exam.

A bench of Justices PS Narasimha and Alok Aradhe directed that a copy of the petitions be served to Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, besides other parties, and asked the National Testing Agency (NTA), which is responsible for conducting the NEET exam, to file an affidavit by Thursday on compliance of directions issued by the court in 2024.

"It's sad that they have not learnt their lessons. The matter travelled to this court earlier also. There was a committee, a monitoring committee which made some recommendations, and they were accepted. We want the NTA to file an affidavit on the steps taken for compliance of recommendations suggested by the committee," the bench said.

The top court, which issued no-



tion on a plea filed by the Federation of All India Medical Association (FAIMA), through lawyer Tanvi Dubey, said it is tagging all similar matters together.

It directed the Centre-appointed committee led by former Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) chief K Radhakrishnan for the overhaul of the functioning of the NTA to detail the steps taken in compliance with its directions.

All the parties were directed to file their responses within three

days by the court, which listed the matter for further hearing on Friday. The medical body has urged the top court for direct restructuring or replacement of NTA with a robust and autonomous system to conduct NEET-UG, citing a "direct assault" on the fundamental rights of over 22 lakh students through recurring paper leaks.

It has also sought a direction to appoint a high-powered monitoring committee until a fresh body is formally constituted to oversee the

re-examination. It further said the committee should comprise a retired Supreme Court judge as the chair, along with a cybersecurity expert and a forensic scientist, to ensure that no further leaks occur.

The undergraduate-level National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) held on May 3 by the NTA for admissions to medical education programmes was cancelled on May 12 amid allegations of paper leak, which are now being probed by the CBI.

In 2024, after the question paper leak of the NEET-UG examination, the top court had refused to cancel the exam but passed various directions aimed at tackling paper leaks and also a criterion for cancelling public exams.

The top court had expanded the mandate of the Radhakrishnan committee and directed it to recommend reforms on examination security, transportation of papers, CCTV surveillance, candidate verification, encryption protocols, technological safeguards, real-time monitoring, grievance redressal and adoption of international best practices. (PTI)

## 8 killed as SUV falls into deep gorge in Maha's Raigad Criminal law can't be set in motion against every relative of husband on omnibus allegations: SC

**MUMBAI, May 25:** Eight persons were killed after a Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV) plunged over 1,000 feet into a gorge in Maharashtra's Raigad district, officials said on Monday.

The accident occurred in the Ambenali Ghat area on Poladpur-Mahabaleshwar road, located about 180 km from Mumbai, between 5 am and 6 am on Sunday, when the victims were on their way from Dapoli to Satara. The vehicle was found in the gorge on Monday morning, a senior police official said. The victims, in the age group of 19 to 35, left from Harne in Dapoli at around 2 am on Sunday in the SUV. When they did not reach Satara, their relatives launched a search in the afternoon and later approached the police.

During the investigation, the victims' last location was traced through a mobile tower near Poladpur. While searching in the Ambenali Ghat section, the police spotted the SUV in the deep gorge on Monday morning, the official said. The police suspect that the accident occurred after the driver lost control of the vehicle in the ghat area, following which it plunged into the gorge, he said.

Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis expressed grief over the death of eight persons and said rescue operations were being carried out on a war footing. (PTI)

**NEW DELHI, May 25:** The Supreme Court on Monday said criminal law cannot be permitted to be set in motion against every relative of the husband in a matrimonial dispute merely on the basis of omnibus allegations lacking a specific factual foundation.

The top court said that while safeguarding the rights and dignity of victims of domestic violence remains of paramount importance, the courts are simultaneously required to ensure that the rigours of criminal law are not indiscriminately extended to every family member without a clear factual foundation.

It said when matrimonial relationships deteriorate and bitterness sets in, there is a natural tendency for allegations to be amplified or broadly worded out of anger, frustration or emotional distress.

"While the anguish of a complainant in a failed marriage cannot be lightly disregarded, equally, criminal law cannot be permitted to be set in motion against every relative of the husband merely on the basis of generalised and omnibus allegations lacking a specific factual foundation," a bench of Justices Sanjay Karol and N Kotiswar Singh said.

It said courts are required to exercise greater caution and carefully scrutinise whether the allegations genuinely disclose the commission of cognisable offences against each accused individually, lest the criminal process itself becomes a "tool of harassment and misuse". The observations came in a verdict which quashed a 2023 FIR lodged in Madhya Pradesh for alleged offences, including under the provisions of the Dowry Prohibition Act, against four family members of a man who was embroiled in a matrimonial dispute.

The bench also quashed the proceedings initiated by the complainant against them in

a separate complaint under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act. The top court noted that during the pendency of proceedings before it, a decree of divorce was granted by a family court dissolving the marriage between the man and the complainant.

However, the bench made clear that the concerned trial court shall proceed with the case against the remaining accused.

It said its verdict shall not operate as a bar to the trial court "exercising its power under Section 319 CrPC to summon the present appellants, if during the course of trial, evidence emerges before it which, in the opinion of the trial court, is sufficient to proceed against them for any of the offences alleged".

It said the court is equally conscious of the reality that genuine cases of cruelty and domestic violence do occur within the confines of the matrimonial home and often remain concealed from public gaze.

"Acts of emotional, verbal, economic or physical abuse within the domestic sphere may not always leave behind readily available evidence or independent witnesses, and the absence of such evidence at the threshold cannot by itself be a ground to disbelieve a victim," the bench said. It said to address this social evil, legislations such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 and the penal provisions relating to cruelty and dowry harassment have been enacted with wide amplitude and protective intent.

The bench said in prosecutions arising out of matrimonial disputes, the allegations against each accused must be specific, distinct and supported by prima facie material indicating active involvement in the alleged acts of cruelty, harassment or unlawful demand of dowry. (PTI)

## Amid West Asia turmoil, Quad foreign ministers gather to reinforce Indo-Pacific stability

**NEW DELHI, May 25:** The economic fallout of the West Asia crisis, the prevailing security situation in the Indo-Pacific and ways to boost cooperation in critical minerals and technology are expected to top the agenda at a crucial meeting of the Quad foreign ministers on Tuesday.

The New Delhi meeting will be attended by US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong and Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi, with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar presiding over it.

The Quad, comprising India, the US, Australia and Japan, has emerged as a key grouping largely focusing on peace, security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

India is hosting the meeting in its capacity as the current chair of the coalition.

The meeting comes nearly a year after the Quad foreign ministers met in Washington DC. The Ministry of External



Affairs (MEA) indicated that the Quad's vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific would be the central focus of the deliberations.

The ministers will exchange views on advancing Quad cooperation across priority areas, review progress on ongoing initiatives and reflect on recent developments in the Indo-Pacific region and other international issues of mutual concern, it said last week.

People familiar with the preparations for the meeting said the Quad foreign ministers will deliberate on the pressing global challenges, including the conflicts in Ukraine and West Asia, and will take stock of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, a region that has been witnessing increasing Chinese assertiveness.

In the last few years, the Quad has rolled out a number of initiatives addressing some of the most pressing needs and

challenges of the Indo-Pacific region, including in areas of maritime security, infrastructure and connectivity.

In the last Quad summit held in Wilmington, US, in 2024, top leaders of the grouping unveiled major steps to expand maritime security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

Tuesday's meeting is also likely to set the broad agenda of the Quad summit that is likely to take place in India later this year.

US Secretary of State Rubio, after holding bilateral talks with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Saturday, described the Quad as an important mechanism.

"Because the Quad is a forum of alignment between four countries which are not just strategically aligned on a bunch of key issues but four countries that have the ability to varying degrees to influence global events on these topics of mutual interest," he said at a media briefing. (PTI)

### CORRIGENDUM

The earlier sand mahal notice Inviting Tender (NIT) originally scheduled for 08/06/2026, which was published on 19/05/2026 is cancelled due to unavoidable circumstances. The next tender date is extended up to 11/06/2026. Other terms and condition will remain the same.

### NOTICE INVITING EXPRESSION OF INTEREST.

Under the provision of Rules 32 (1) & (2) of Assam Mines and Mineral sealed tender are hereby invited for grant of Mining Permit/ Contract for collection of Sand/Stone as per Annexure 'A'. The prescribed form is to be obtained from the undersigned and will be received up to 3:00 PM (IST) on or before 11/06/2026.

### ANNEXURE-'A'

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

Sl. No.	Name of Mahal	Quantity	Period	Govt. Value	Earnest Money	GPS Coordinate
1.	Jamuna River Sand Mahal, Langkangbop	12,000 m <sup>3</sup>	2 Year	16,80,000/-	10% 1,68,000/-	1. 26°00'49.1" N 93°14'09.2" E
						2. 26°00'47.2" N 93°14'10.3" E
						3. 26°00'57.1" N 93°14'00.3" E
						4. 26°00'57.0" N 93°14'02.4" E
2.	Jamuna River Sand Mahal No. 9	12,000 m <sup>3</sup>	2 Year	16,80,000/-	10% 1,68,000/-	1. 26°00'36.1" N 93°15'11.3" E
						2. 26°00'34.7" N 93°15'11.3" E
						3. 26°01'00.6" N 93°14'01.3" E
						4. 26°00'59.7" N 93°13'54.7" E
3.	Jamuna River Sand Mahal No. 5	20,000 m <sup>3</sup>	2 Year	28,00,000/-	10% 2,80,000/-	1. 25°59'47.00" N 93°22'18.22" E
						2. 25°59'46.88" N 93°22'19.45" E
						3. 25°59'12.31" N 93°21'44.00" E
						4. 25°59'13.47" N 93°21'44.36" E
4.	Jamuna River Sand Mahal Sikari Pathar Singiman	10,000 m <sup>3</sup>	2 Year	14,00,000/-	10% 1,40,000/-	1. 26°01'39.6" N 93°13'06.9" E
						2. 26°01'41.6" N 93°13'02.8" E
						3. 26°01'42.0" N 93°12'58.7" E
5.	Jamuna River Sand Mahal Singimari	6,000 m <sup>3</sup>	2 Year	8,40,000/-	10% 84,000/-	1. 26°04'33.6" N 93°06'24.7" E
						2. 26°04'33.4" N 93°06'25.4" E
						3. 26°04'19.6" N 93°06'57.4" E
						4. 26°04'20.7" N 93°06'58.4" E
6.	Doigrung River Sand Mahal	20,000 m <sup>3</sup>	2 Year	28,00,000/-	10% 2,80,000/-	1. 26°21'43.8" N 93°46'13.6" E
						2. 26°21'47.1" N 93°46'15.6" E
						3. 26°21'44.3" N 93°46'11.3" E
						4. 26°21'48.3" N 93°46'13.0" E
7.	Kailoni Richomili Sand cum Sand Gravel	15,000 m <sup>3</sup> Sand Gravel 5,000 m <sup>3</sup> Sand	2 Year	30,00,000/- 7,00,000/-	10% 3,70,000/-	1. 26°27'21.01" N 93°43'36.21" E
						2. 26°27'20.50" N 93°43'36.73" E
						3. 26°27'36.07" N 93°45'13.38" E
						4. 26°27'34.86" N 93°46'12.87" E
8.	Upper Laichan, Nagalanso Sand Mahal	12,000 m <sup>3</sup>	2 Years	16,80,000/-	10% 1,68,000/-	1. 26°09'089" N 93°41'674" E
						2. 26°09'091" N 93°41'689" E
						3. 26°09'784" N 93°42'150" E
						4. 26°09'777" N 93°42'181" E

# Indian puppetry: A new direction

By: Simanta Sarma

Indian puppetry is a very ancient, profound, and multidimensional performing art form enriched with diverse artistic techniques, deeply rooted in Indian civilization and culture. This art is not merely a medium of entertainment, it is a vivid expression of society's thoughts, beliefs, morality, and philosophy of life. It is also connected with fields such as education, commerce, science, and medicine, and is closely associated with rituals, mythological narratives, folklore, and social realities. Over the ages, this art has touched human hearts deeply and contributed to shaping society.

With the passage of time, as society, politics, and culture have changed, puppetry has also undergone transformations in its form, themes, and applications. Indian puppetry has occupied a prominent place on the global stage. In the modern era of India, this transformed form can be described as "a new direction in Indian puppetry."

The history of Indian puppetry extends back to ancient times. References to puppets are found in Sanskrit literature, particularly in the *Natyashastra*, where the term *Sutradhar* reflects the philosophical significance of puppetry. The word *Sutradhar* means a person who controls characters with the help of strings or threads. This concept compares life to puppets controlled by an invisible string, reflecting the depth of Indian spiritual philosophy. Moreover, literary works such as *Panchatantra*, *Kathasaritsagara*, *Hitopadesha*, and *Burhi Air Sadhu* contain puppet-like characters and narrative structures, indicating that puppetry was an important medium of storytelling.

Archaeological evidence and folk traditions indicate that even before the development of formal theatre, puppetry was used in religious rituals, worship practices, and collective storytelling. Puppet theatre especially developed as a popular art form during temple festivals, royal court entertainment, and village fairs. Through this medium, religious beliefs, mythological stories, and the moral codes of society were communicated to the common people.

During the ancient and medieval periods, different forms of puppetry evolved across various regions of India. In Rajasthan, the *Kathputli* tradition became particularly popular, where wooden puppets controlled by strings were used to present tales of *Rajput* bravery and folklore. In Karnataka, *Gombeyatta*; in Andhra Pradesh, shadow puppetry known as *Tholu Bommalata*; and in Kerala, *Tholpavakoothu* were widely practiced. In West Bengal and Odisha, *rod puppetry* (*Putul Nach*) flourished, while in northeastern states such as Assam, folk-based puppet traditions played an important role in the dissemination of social and religious narratives. Stories from the great epics were often adapted for puppet performances. In this way, puppet theatre became a medium that integrated multiple artistic elements and served as a means of knowledge dissemination.

During the medieval period, particularly in the time of the *Bhakti* movement, puppetry was used as an important medium for religious devotion and moral education. Mythological narratives such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Krishna* legends were presented to the masses through puppet theatre. During this time, puppetry was considered not merely a form of entertainment but also a powerful tool for social education.

During the colonial period, the influence of modern theatre and Western entertainment caused puppetry to face certain challenges. Nevertheless, in rural society and folk culture, the art managed to preserve its existence. After independence, puppetry experienced a revival through the initiatives of government cultural institutions, researchers, and artists. Cultural festivals, educational programs, and public awareness campaigns used puppetry to give new life to this art form.

In the present era, puppetry has gained a new direction by integrating traditional concepts with modern technology, new themes, and social messages. It has been widely used in educational programs, health awareness, environmental protection, and social reform initiatives. Thus, Indian puppetry has created a beautiful bridge between tradition and modernity.

Just like India's geographical and cultural diversity, puppetry has developed in multiple forms. Rajasthan's string puppets or *Kathputli* reflect royal court life, heroic legends, and folklore. In West Bengal, *rod puppetry* or *Putul Nach* is known for its strong social themes and dramatic language. In Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, shadow puppetry (*Tholu Bommalata*, *Togalu Gombeyatta*) is famous for its large leather puppets and lengthy epic presentations. Kerala's glove puppetry, *Pavakathakali*, is a puppet adaptation of the theatrical language of *Kathakali*. All these traditions reflect local society, beliefs, and lifestyles, making Indian puppetry a rich and diverse cultural heritage.

India is a country enriched with multiple languages, ethnicities, and cultures. This geographical and cultural diversity is clearly reflected in Indian folk arts as well. Puppetry or puppet theatre is one of the oldest and most popular folk performing arts of India. In different states of the country, various forms of puppetry have developed according to local traditions, beliefs, languages, and social environments. This regional diversity has established Indian puppetry as a unique cultural heritage.

In Rajasthan, string puppets or *Kathputli* are the most popular form of puppetry. The word *Kathputli* is derived from *kath* (wood) and *putli* (puppet). These puppets are usually made of wood and are decorated with colorful fabrics, ornaments, and royal costumes. They are controlled with the help of strings, which is why they are called string puppets.

Rajsthani *Kathputli* performances generally depict tales of *Rajput* bravery, royal court life, folklore, and historical events. These puppet plays are presented through a combination of music, dance, and humor. Traditionally, artists from the *Bhat* community have preserved this art form. This tradition reflects the social history and cultural heritage of Rajasthan.

In West Bengal, *rod puppetry* or *Putul Nach* is a significant form of puppetry. These puppets are generally large in size and are controlled with the help of rods or sticks. The performers dance and act along with the puppets, giving the performance a more lively and dramatic appearance.

The themes of *Putul Nach* are usually based on mythological stories, social issues, and moral lessons. Strong dramatic language, music, and dialogue are used in this art form, and it is also employed to create social awareness.

In South India, shadow puppetry is a very ancient and highly developed form of puppetry. In Andhra Pradesh it is known as *Tholu Bommalata*, and in Karnataka as *Togalu Gombeyatta*. These puppets are usually made of leather or translucent materials and are decorated with colorful designs.

In shadow puppet theatre, the shadows of the puppets are created using a light source and a screen. These performances are generally based on the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and other mythological stories. The presentations are lengthy and enriched with a combination of music, vocal narration, and dance. This art reflects the religious beliefs and cultural traditions of South India.

In Kerala, glove puppetry known as *Pavakathakali* is a unique form of puppetry influenced by the classical dance-drama *Kathakali*. These puppets are worn on the fingers and controlled by hand movements.

In *Pavakathakali* performances, costumes, facial expressions, and dramatic language similar to *Kathakali* are used. The themes are generally mythological and religious, and the art is closely connected with Kerala's traditional music and theatrical style.

Assam also has its own puppetry tradition. Assamese puppet theatre is generally used to present folklore, mythological stories, and social messages. Puppets in Assam are made using bamboo, cloth, paper, and clay. Through puppet theatre, educational and social awareness is promoted. In modern times, puppetry in Assam has been used in education, health awareness, and social development programs. Puppetry performances are also inspired by stories from films and documentaries, making them engaging for audiences.

In the field of education, puppetry has been integrated with school curricula to help students understand lessons more easily. Small puppet-based performances, including drama and dance, are created based on classroom subjects to benefit learners. Educational puppet content has been developed on topics such as value education, science, mathematics, social studies, religion, and spirituality. In this field, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) under the Government of India and the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) under the Government of Assam have taken initiatives to incorporate such methods in education. Along with them, private institutions have also been working in this area. In this regard, *Surojit Academy* of Guwahati has been providing educational programs in schools through puppetry.

The regional diversity of Indian puppetry reflects the country's rich and multifaceted cultural heritage. These art forms represent local societies, religious beliefs, historical events, and lifestyles. Puppet theatre is not only a medium of entertainment but also a powerful tool for education, social awareness, and cultural preservation.

In the modern era, governments and various cultural organizations have undertaken several initiatives to preserve and promote puppetry. By including puppet theatre in schools, theatre festivals, and cultural programs, the younger generation is being introduced to this heritage.

Traditionally, puppetry was an important medium for social development. Stories from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, regional legends, and folklore were presented to the public in simple and engaging ways through puppet theatre. These stories conveyed moral values such as truth, duty, sacrifice, and justice.

Puppeteers were custodians of oral history. Through songs, dialogues, and dramatic structures, they preserved the memories, experiences, and history of society. Puppet theatre also created awareness among people by presenting social inequalities, injustice by rulers, poverty, and everyday problems through satire and symbolism. Because of its simple visual language and theatrical structure, this art was

theatre themes according to contemporary social issues and the interests of the younger generation. Although puppet theatre has been used in some instances for education, health awareness, and social messaging, greater initiatives are needed to incorporate modern themes on a larger scale.

The Ministry of Culture, Government of India, the Centre for Cultural Resources and Training (CCRT), the *Sangeet Natak Akademi*, and various cultural organizations have taken steps to preserve puppetry. Through theatre festivals, workshops, training camps, and financial assistance, artists have been encouraged. However, these efforts need to be more extensive and organized. Although puppetry faces many challenges, there is significant potential to revive this art with the help of modern technology and new ideas. By incorporating puppet theatre into school education, presenting it through digital media, and connecting it with social themes, the younger generation can be engaged with this art. Cultural tourism and international festivals also provide opportunities to promote this art globally. Amid these challenges, Indian puppetry is moving toward a new direction. Contemporary puppeteers and theatre practitioners are redefining this art according to modern societal needs rather than limiting it to heritage preservation. Through new materials, smaller and more mobile puppets, modern themes, and innovative staging, puppetry is being given a new form.

Currently, puppetry is being successfully used in education, science communication, health awareness, environmental protection, financial literacy, voter awareness, and social campaigns. Complex subjects can be communicated to the public in a simple, enjoyable, and memorable way through puppet theatre. This usage has made puppetry socially relevant once again.

Indian puppetry is a rich cultural heritage that has evolved over centuries. Despite facing various challenges in the modern era, this art has not disappeared; rather, through new ideas, technology, and social applications, it is moving forward in new directions. Contemporary puppeteers, theatre practitioners, and cultural organizations are redefining puppetry according to modern needs instead of limiting it to tradition.

Earlier, traditional materials such as wood, clay, bamboo, cloth, and leather were used to make puppets. Today, artists have started using fiber, thermocol, foam, plastic, *papier-mache*, and recyclable materials. The use of these new materials has made puppets lighter, more durable, and easier to manipulate. Additionally, modern lighting systems, sound technology, and digital projection have made puppet performances more attractive. In some cases, the combination of multimedia and animation has also given puppet theatre a new dimension. For modern stages and mobile performances, smaller and easily portable puppets are becoming more popular. This change has made it easier to present puppet shows in schools, rural areas, health camps, and social events, making the art more people-oriented and relevant.

Contemporary puppet theatre now includes not only mythological or historical stories but also various modern social issues. Topics such as health awareness, environmental conservation, gender equality, the importance of education, and children's rights are successfully presented through puppet theatre. Because of its simple and enjoyable presentation style, even complex subjects become easy for ordinary people to understand. This medium has proven especially effective in creating awareness among rural communities and children. Many educational institutions and science organizations are now using puppet theatre as a teaching tool. It is being used in schools to explain moral education, hygiene, and scientific concepts. Various science centers and educational institutions in India are also using puppetry to promote science communication and scientific temper.

Puppetry is currently being used as an important medium in various government and social campaigns. Health departments use puppet theatre for vaccination drives, sanitation campaigns, and public health awareness. It is also effective in promoting financial literacy, voter awareness, environmental conservation, and women's safety. Government agencies, NGOs, and cultural groups are working to create awareness at different social levels through puppet theatre.

For the revival of puppetry, various cultural organizations and government institutions have been organizing training camps, workshops, and festivals. The *Sangeet Natak Akademi*, Ministry of Culture, and regional cultural centers are playing important roles in preserving and developing puppetry. International puppet festivals have also helped introduce Indian puppetry to the global stage. Cultural tourism has further increased the importance of puppetry, as tourists from India and abroad show interest in traditional puppet performances, creating new economic opportunities and global recognition for artists. An important feature of the new direction of puppetry is its connection with modern theatre and technology. By combining live actors, puppets, music, modern lighting, sound design, video, and multimedia, a new theatrical language has emerged. This fusion has made puppetry a powerful medium of symbolic and abstract expression. Traditionally, puppetry was associated with folk culture, religious narratives, and social education. However, with developments in theatrical styles and technology, new dimensions have emerged. Puppet theatre is no longer limited to traditional presentation but has integrated with modern theatrical thinking, stage design, and advanced technology, making it more creative and contemporary. The combined use of live actors and puppets has become an important modern theatrical trend. In such performances, actors interact with puppets or control their movements, creating deeper and more symbolic expressions. Many global theatre practitioners have used this method to develop new theatrical languages, and in India too, contemporary theatre groups are using this fusion to present social, psychological, and philosophical themes.

Modern lighting has added a new dimension to puppet theatre. The use of colored lights, dynamic lighting, and special projections enhances the dramatic atmosphere. Particularly in shadow puppetry, modern lighting makes movements and shapes clearer. Stage design has also evolved with technology, including movable stages, projection screens, and digital scenery, making performances more realistic. Music and sound have always been important in puppetry, and modern sound technology has further enhanced presentations. Recorded music, digital sound effects, and live music combinations increase emotional impact and audience engagement.



easily accessible to people of all ages and educational levels. Although the cultural value of puppetry is immense, in the modern era it faces many challenges. Urbanization and the widespread influence of television, cinema, and digital media have gradually reduced audiences for traditional puppet theatre. Hereditary puppeteer families are facing economic difficulties, forcing many artists to shift to other professions.

Furthermore, the lack of proper documentation, limited training systems, and the absence of regular performance opportunities have caused puppetry to become neglected. Even where preservation efforts exist, there is often a lack of connection with contemporary society. Puppetry is one of India's oldest and most traditional folk performing arts. Over centuries, it has played an important role in religious storytelling, folk culture, social education, and entertainment. However, in the modern era, rapid social change, technological advancement, and lifestyle transformation have created numerous challenges and crises for puppetry. These problems threaten not only the survival of the art form but also the livelihoods of the artists associated with it.

In today's world, the widespread expansion of digital media such as television, cinema, mobile phones, and the internet has completely transformed people's concepts of entertainment. The easy availability and attractiveness of digital entertainment have gradually reduced public interest in traditional puppet theatre. Earlier, puppet shows were popular in villages and towns during festivals, fairs, and social events, but now the number of such events has decreased. As a result, puppeteers are facing difficulties in obtaining regular performance opportunities.

Due to urbanization, the space for traditional folk culture has gradually shrunk. Because of the busy nature of modern life and lack of time, people have fewer opportunities to enjoy long folk dramas or puppet performances. Moreover, in urban society, modern entertainment media has gained greater importance, resulting in the neglect of folk arts. Puppetry was mostly preserved through hereditary traditions. Many families were associated with this art for generations. However, due to irregular income, limited performance opportunities, and lack of government support, many artists have been forced to shift to other professions. As a result, interest among the younger generation in learning this art has declined, threatening its continuity.

Traditionally, the guru-disciple system was used to teach puppetry. But in modern times, this tradition has gradually weakened. Organized education systems, training centers, and research opportunities related to puppetry are limited. Consequently, there is a risk that many subtle techniques and traditional knowledge may disappear without proper documentation.

Many forms of puppetry depend on oral traditions. Numerous folk stories, scripts, music, and techniques are not preserved in written or digital form. Therefore, with the death of experienced artists or their change of profession, the possibility of losing valuable information has increased. In many cases, there are limitations in adapting puppet

Video projection, animation, and multimedia are increasingly used in puppet theatre. These technologies help present background scenes, narratives, and symbolic imagery effectively, aligning puppetry with international standards. One of the greatest strengths of puppetry is symbolic expression. Through puppets, human emotions, psychological states, and philosophical ideas can be conveyed effectively. Modern theatrical experiments use puppetry to explore abstract themes such as human psychology, social conflict, and environmental crises.

This approach has established puppetry not only as a folk art but also as an important part of contemporary theatre. The fusion of modern theatre and technology has also made puppetry more effective in education and social awareness. Multimedia-assisted puppet performances in schools, science centers, and social programs help explain complex topics in simple ways.

This integration has also brought Indian puppetry to international recognition. Indian puppet performances are being presented successfully in international theatre festivals and cultural exchange programs, enhancing creativity and global appreciation.

Indian puppet theatre is one of the oldest and richest folk performing arts of the country. Over time, it has remained closely connected with Indian society, religious traditions, and folk culture. With modern theatrical experiments, technological use, and cultural exchange programs, Indian puppetry has gained greater global recognition and appreciation. Its presence in international festivals, cultural events, and research fields continues to grow.

Indian puppet theatre is regularly presented in festivals around the world. In Europe, Asia, and America, Indian artists have performed string puppets, shadow puppets, and glove puppets, earning international praise. These festivals provide opportunities not only for promotion but also for creative collaboration and exchange with puppetry traditions from other countries.

The integration of modern technology and theatrical experimentation has made Indian puppetry more appealing to international audiences. Multimedia, modern lighting, and sound technologies have enhanced presentations, enabling Indian puppetry to evolve in harmony with global contemporary theatre trends. Research on Indian puppetry is being conducted in universities and cultural research centers worldwide. These studies have highlighted its historical significance, theatrical language, and social role at the global level. Puppetry has also been included in theatre education and cultural studies in many academic institutions.

Indian puppet theatre has also gained importance in the field of cultural tourism. Tourists from both India and abroad have shown interest in enjoying Indian folk theatre and puppet performances. This interest has created new financial and professional opportunities for artists. Moreover, as international cultural organizations such as UNESCO emphasize the preservation of folk arts, the global recognition of Indian puppetry has increased.

International collaboration has provided Indian puppetry with opportunities to learn new theatrical styles and techniques. Joint theatre projects and workshops with artists from different countries have enabled new creative experiments. This collaboration has given puppetry a more modern and multidimensional form. National and international puppet festivals, workshops, and training programs have strengthened this new direction of puppetry. Under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, institutions such as the *Sangeet Natak Akademi*, Centre for Cultural Resources and Training (CCRT), National School of Drama, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), and various cultural organizations have provided opportunities for research, documentation, and performance. Additionally, the active participation of women artists and independent puppeteers has introduced new voices, themes, and perspectives into puppetry.

Today, Indian puppetry stands at an important crossroads. The balance between preserving tradition and integrating modernity will determine the future of this art form. In its new direction, puppetry respects the past while fulfilling present needs and preparing the path for the future.

Indian puppetry is a rich folk performing art that has evolved over centuries. It has played a significant role in society, culture, and education. At present, puppetry is at a crucial turning point, where balancing tradition and modernity has become essential. This balance will shape its future development. Puppetry is deeply connected with Indian folk culture, religious narratives, and social values. To preserve this art, it is essential to document traditional techniques, scripts, music, and presentation styles. Governments and cultural institutions have undertaken research, documentation, and preservation initiatives in this field. Institutions such as the *Sangeet Natak Akademi*, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), and the Centre for Cultural Resources and Training (CCRT) are playing important roles in preserving the heritage of puppetry.

For the future development of puppetry, it is extremely important to engage the younger generation with this art. By incorporating puppet theatre into schools and educational institutions, creativity and cultural awareness among students can be enhanced. Through various training camps, workshops, and theatre festivals, puppetry techniques are being spread among the new generation. These initiatives will help maintain the continuity of the art form. The use of modern technology has further brightened the future prospects of puppetry. Through digital media, multimedia, animation, and online platforms, puppet theatre can now reach larger audiences. Social media and video platforms have created new opportunities to promote puppetry globally.

Puppet theatre has become a powerful medium for creating awareness in various sectors of society. Topics such as health awareness, environmental protection, financial literacy, the importance of education, and social development are presented in a simple and engaging manner through puppetry. It is expected that this medium will gain even greater importance in social development in the future.

Puppetry can also play an important role in cultural tourism. Interest in folk arts among tourists is increasing. By linking puppet theatre and puppet-making crafts with tourism, new economic opportunities can be created for artists. This will not only improve artists' livelihoods but also ensure the preservation of the art. Through cultural exchange and joint theatre projects with different countries, Indian puppetry has gained new directions. Participation in international festivals and research activities has increased its global recognition. Such collaborations will continue to support the creative growth of puppetry in the future.

Thus, Indian puppetry is not merely a memory of the past; it remains a living, powerful, and relevant art form even today. Its ability to evolve in harmony with society has kept it timeless and will preserve it as a valuable cultural heritage for future generations.

Indian puppetry is not just a legacy of the past; it is still a vibrant and dynamic art form. The integration of tradition, modern technology, education, and social application can further enrich its future. Its adaptability to social change has ensured its continuity and strengthened its potential to be preserved as a valuable cultural heritage for generations to come.

# Injured Yamal and Williams in Spain's World Cup squad, no Real Madrid players named

**MADRID, May 25:** Injured forwards Lamine Yamal and Nico Williams were included Monday in Spain's World Cup squad.

Yamal and Williams sustained muscle injuries late in the season but coach Luis de la Fuente said he expects them to be fit for the start of the World Cup.

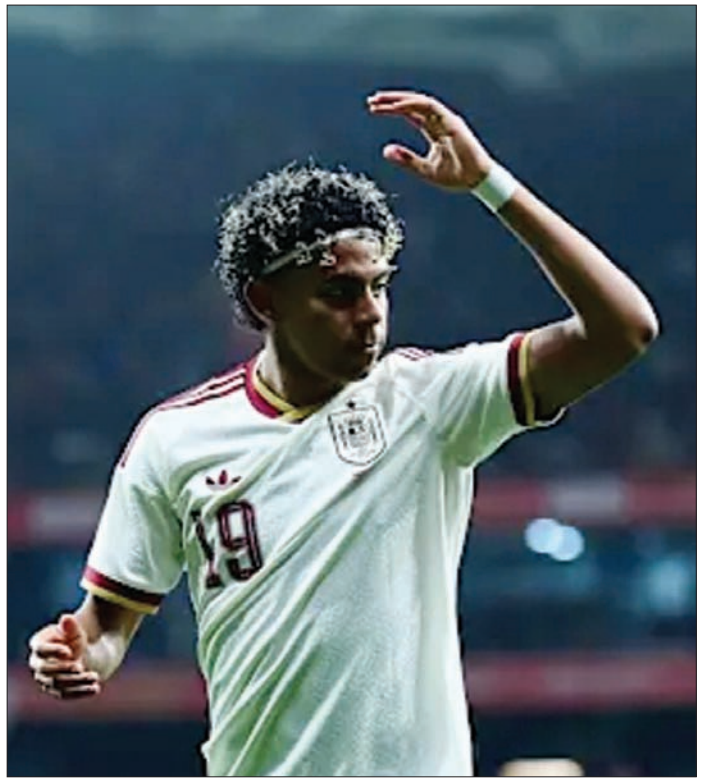
Spain opens its campaign against Cape Verde in Group H on June 15 in Atlanta. It then faces Saudi Arabia on June 21 in Atlanta and Uruguay on June 26 in Guadalajara, Mexico.

For the first time there won't be a Real Madrid player in a Spain World Cup party. Defender Dean Huijsen was among the contenders for a place but he was left out by De la Fuente.

Out as expected was Barcelona midfielder Fermín López, who sustained a fracture on his right foot this month.

Midfielder Mikel Merino, who played only once for Arsenal since injuring his foot in January, is back in the Spain squad. Also included despite a recent injury is Paris Saint-Germain midfielder Fabián Ruiz.

Spain's preparations will begin on Saturday. It plays warmup



matches against Iraq on June 4 and Peru on June 9.

It rebounded from a round-of-16 elimination by Morocco at the 2022 World Cup by winning Euro 2024 in Germany. La Roja also

won the 2023 Nations League and was runner-up to Portugal in the 2025 edition.

Spain hasn't gone further than the last 16 in the World Cup since its lone title triumph in 2010.

**Squad:**  
**Goalkeepers:** Unai Simón (Athletic Bilbao), David Raya (Arsenal), Joan García (Barcelona)

**Defenders:** Marc Cucurella (Chelsea), Alejandro Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen), Marcos Llorente (Atletico Madrid), Pau Cubarsí (Barcelona), Aymeric Laporte (Athletic Bilbao), Pedro Porro (Tottenham), Eric García (Barcelona), Marc Pubill (Atletico Madrid)

**Midfielders:** Rodri (Manchester City), Martín Zubimendi (Arsenal), Pedri (Barcelona), Dani Olmo (Barcelona), Mikel Merino (Arsenal), Fabián Ruiz (Paris Saint-Germain), Gavi (Barcelona)

**Forwards:** Lamine Yamal (Barcelona), Ferran Torres (Barcelona), Yérémi Pino (Crystal Palace), Mikel Oyarzabal (Real Sociedad), Víctor Muñoz (Osasuna), Alex Baena (Atletico Madrid), Borja Iglesias (Celta Vigo), Nico Williams (Athletic Bilbao). (AP)

# Upbeat Indian women's hockey team ready for Australia challenge

**PERTH, May 25:** The Indian women's hockey team would look to kickstart its preparations for the FIH Nations Cup on a positive note when it takes on Australia in the four-match series starting here on Tuesday. The Salima Tete-led side will aim to build vital momentum ahead of the crucial FIH Hockey Women's Nations Cup to be held in Auckland from June 15 to 21.

Fresh from an encouraging display in Argentina earlier this year, where India drew the four-match series 2-2 against the world No. 2 side after losing the first two matches, the visiting team enters this tour with confidence.

The squad spent the last few weeks grinding through high-intensity tactical drills at the national training camp in SAI Bengaluru, which helped the players sharpen their skills, structural play, penalty corner variations and overall match fitness under the watchful eyes of chief coach Sjoerd Marjine.

India captain Salima said the players are upbeat about the tour.

"The entire squad is really looking forward to this tour. Playing against Australia, especially on their home turf, is always a tough challenge, and that is exactly what we need at this stage of our preparations. Every match in Perth will be



crucial for us," she said. "We want to head into the Nations Cup in Auckland with momentum and confidence. Australia will push us to our limits, and we want to use that to become a stronger unit."

The 22-member Indian team has an exciting mix of youth and experience, with rising talents Sonam, Hina Bano and Lalhanluangi eagerly waiting for their opportunity.

Currently ranked ninth in the FIH World Rankings, the Indian team is ready to pull out all stops to challenge its eighth ranked opponents.

**Schedule (all times IST):** India vs Australia, Match 1: May 26 (17:00 hrs), India vs Australia,

Match 2: May 27 (17:00 hrs), India vs Australia, Match 3: May 29 (11:00 hrs), India vs Australia, Match 4: May 30 (11:00 hrs).

**Indian squad:**  
**Goalkeepers:** Savita, Bichu Devi Kharibam

**Defenders:** Nikki Pradhan, Ishika Chaudhary, Sushila Chanu Pukhrabam, Lalhanluangi, Jyoti, Shilpi Dabas

**Midfielders:** Salima Tete, Lalremsiami, Neha, Sakshi Rana, Sunelita Toppo, Deepika Soreng, Sonam

**Forwards:** Navneet Kaur, Baljeet Kaur, Deepika, Annu, Ishika, Hina Bano, Rutuja Dadaso Pisal. (PTI)

# Lakshya, Sindhu lead Indian challenge at Singapore Open

**SINGAPORE, May 25:** India's top shuttlers Lakshya Sen and PV Sindhu will look to regain consistency and end their title drought when they spearhead the country's challenge at the USD 1,000,000 Singapore Open Super 750 tournament beginning here on Tuesday.

Reigning Commonwealth Games champion Lakshya, who won the Australia Open last November, will hope to bounce back from last week's first-round exit and make a deep run when he opens his campaign against China's Lu Guang Zu. He had come close to winning a title at the All England Championships before finishing runner-up.

In women's singles, two-time Olympic medallist Sindhu, who reached the quarterfinals at the Thailand Open, will begin her campaign against Indonesia's fifth seed Putri Kusuma Wardani. The Indian has faced significant challenges maintaining her elite form following injuries in 2025, leading to a period of inconsistency and early exits in various BWF World



Tour events.

Young Indian shuttler Ayush Shetty, who finished runner-up at the Asian Championships and played a key role in India's bronze medal-winning Thomas Cup campaign, will take on Canada's Victor Lai, last year's World Championships bronze medallist.

The focus will also be on India's two experienced campaigners, Kidambi Srikanth and HS Prannoy, both 33, as they seek to rediscover consistency.

Former world No. 1 Srikanth will once again face local favourite Loh Kean Yew, the 2021 world champion whom he had defeated at the Thailand Open earlier this month.

Prannoy, a bronze medallist at the 2023 World Championships and Asian Games, faces a difficult opening-round contest against Indonesia's fifth seed Jonatan Christie.

World No. 22 Unnati Hooda, winner of the Polish Open earlier this year, faces a tough opener

against eighth-seeded Japanese shuttler Tomoka Miyazaki, a former junior world champion.

Malvika Bansod, returning after recovering from an ACL injury, will meet Chinese Taipei's Lin Hsiang Ti.

In men's doubles, fourth-seeded Indian pair Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty, who reached the final at the Thailand Open Super 500, will open against the American duo of Chen Zhi Yi and Presley Smith.

While Hariharan Amsakarunan and M.R. Arjun will face Japan's seventh-seeded combination of Takuro Hoki and Yugo Kobayashi.

Among the women's doubles pairs, India's Kavipriya Selvam and Simran Singh will meet Spain's Paula Lopez and Lucia Rodriguez.

The Panda sisters, Rutaparna and Swetaparna, will take on Thailand's Phatharin Aiamvareesrisakul and Sarisa Jangpeng.

India's Ashwini Bhat K. and Shikha Gautam will face Chinese Taipei's Chang Ching Hui and Yang Ching Tun. (PTI)

# Thoughts of stepping down never came to me, says Rahane



**KOLKATA, May 25:** Kolkata Knight Riders captain Ajinkya Rahane said thoughts of stepping down never crossed his mind despite the side's disastrous start to the IPL season, adding that it is important to show character when the team is struggling.

The former champions endured a miserable start to their IPL campaign, losing five of their opening six matches and sinking to the bottom of the points table.

However, they staged a remarkable turnaround by winning six of their final eight games, briefly reviving hopes of a playoff qualification before eventually falling short.

"For me, I've played cricket all my life with a good attitude. Character has always been very important for me," Rahane said at the post match press conference after the team's last game of the season. KKR lost by 40 runs against Delhi Capitals on Sunday.

"I'm never one to back down. When the team is down, when the team is struggling, it's very important to show your character at that time. I am never one that steps down. When the team is struggling, it is important to show your character."

"Yes, there's pressure. It's very natural but the pressure is on those who are privileged. Not everyone can handle the pressure. For me, it was important to stay strong and not panic. It's very easy when you lose 5-6 matches, your focus shifts to the past and the future."

Rahane himself endured an underwhelming campaign with the bat. The veteran opener scored 335

runs in 14 matches at a strike rate of 135. His strike rate outside the Powerplay was also among the lowest in the competition.

"It's important that you stay in that moment. Things can turn around any time. We've seen in a lot of matches and series how things change. It's very important to maintain that attitude and character. I'm never one to back down. Those thoughts (of stepping down) never came to me," added Rahane, who famously led the Indian Test team to the 2020-21 Border-Gavaskar title after a disastrous 36 all out.

**Wanted to give time to Indian bowlers**

KKR's campaign was disrupted even before it began, with several key players, including pacers Harshit Rana and Akash Deep, suffering injuries. The franchise was also forced to release Bangladesh pacer Mustafizur Rahman on instructions of the BCCI in the wake of diplomatic tensions between the two countries, leaving their bowling attack severely depleted.

Rahane said the setbacks prompted him to back domestic Indian talent.

"We lost a few players during the season and it's challenging all the time, but I was not looking at that. I was confident about and wanted to give time to the Indian bowlers. I knew that, I was confident that if we back them, if we give them that time, they will do really well under pressure."

The injuries ultimately opened the door for spin all-rounder Anukul Roy and pacer Kartik Tyagi, both of whom seized their opportunities impressively.

Tyagi emerged as one of KKR's standout performers with 18 wickets, the third-highest tally among Indian bowlers in the league stage. While Roy picked up nine wickets in 12 innings and also remained unbeaten in two successful run chases.

"When we sat down at the start of the season, I thought, this is a great time for Anukul to come in and play each and every game," Rahane said. (PTI)

# Four-time champ Iga Swiatek not taking anything for granted at French Open amid tough clay season

**PARIS, May 25:** It was a massive mismatch on paper and that's the way it ended up on court, too.

Four-time champion Iga Swiatek required exactly one hour to eliminate 136th-ranked French Open debutante Emerson Jones 6-1, 6-2 in the first round on Monday, in front of a mostly empty Court Philippe-Chatrier on another steamy day in Paris.

The only real issue for the third-ranked Swiatek came when she needed a trainer to re-tape the middle finger on her tennis-playing right hand for an apparent blister after the first set.

"I'm just really happy to play on this court," she said. "First matches are always also for getting used to the condition tactically and type of the ball."

Swiatek has not won a title on clay this season and recently made a coaching change. She hired Francisco Roig, who previously worked with record 14-time French Open champion Rafael Nadal.

"Nothing comes easy," Swiatek said. "With more titles it's even a bit harder because every-

one expects you to be ready always and play perfectly. So you need to stay humble and not take anything for granted and work your way from the beginning of the tournament."

She improved to 28-1 in first-round matches at Grand Slams.

With the temperature due to rise to 32 degrees Celsius (90 Fahrenheit), Swiatek did well to make short work of her 17-year-old Australian opponent, who received a wild-card invitation from Roland Garros organizers.

Also advancing was Jasmine Paolini, who lost the 2024 final to Swiatek. The Italian beat Dayana Yastremska 7-5, 6-3.

In men's action, eighth-seeded Alex De Minaur defeated Toby Samuel 6-4, 6-4, 6-2.

Later, 2015 champion Stan Wawrinka and the popular Gael Monfils are in action in their final French Open before both players retire at the end of the year.

The 41-year-old Wawrinka takes on qualifier Jesper de Jong, who took the spot of Arthur Fils after the top French player withdrew due to a hip issue. (AP)

# Nishesh Basavareddy stuns 7th seed Taylor Fritz

**PARIS, May 25:** Indian-origin tennis player Nishesh Basavareddy caused the first major upset of the French Open as he stunned seventh-seeded American Taylor Fritz in the opening round here.

Wild card entrant Basavareddy, an American citizen now, beat world number nine Fritz 7-6(5), 7-6(5), 6-7(9), 6-1 in a gruelling match that lasted two hours and 45 minutes on Sunday to reach the second round.

The 21-year-old, whose parents moved to the USA from Nellore in Andhra Pradesh in 1999, became the first American man to beat a top-10 opponent at Roland Garros since Jan-Michael Gambill eliminated then-World No. 8 Nicolas Pietrangeli in 2000.

He was aggressive early, using plenty of drop shots and his backhand down the line. He also withstood 71 winners from Fritz, hitting 51 of his own to claim the first Top-10 victory of his career.

Basavareddy had played just five tour-level matches this season when he walked on court against Fritz. He will face another young American Alex Michelsen in the second round. (PTI)

# Brazil turns to Carlo Ancelotti to end long wait for World Cup glory

**SAO PAULO, May 25:** Brazil's biggest hope to end a 24-year World Cup title drought is not a clinical striker, a creative midfielder or a dribbling winger like in previous editions of the tournament. This time Brazilians are pinning their hopes on a 66-year-old Italian, who will be sitting on the bench.

Carlo Ancelotti, one of the most successful coaches of his generation, left Real Madrid to take over Brazil's national team last year, a rare example of a foreign coach in charge of the Seleção. Even though his results have been mixed — five wins, three losses and two draws — the country is optimistic he can elevate a squad which is seen as less star-studded than Brazil's iconic teams of the past, despite high-profile players like Neymar and Vinicius Júnior.

While Brazil has won the World Cup five times — more than any other team — it hasn't lifted the trophy since 2002, an eternity for a soccer-obsessed nation that produced some of the most brilliant players in history, such as Ronaldo,

Ronaldinho and Pelé.

Since 2002 it has only gotten beyond the quarterfinals once — as World Cup host in 2014 — and even that tournament ended in disappointment after an embarrassing 7-1 semifinal loss to eventual champion Germany.

Brazil's self-confidence hasn't been helped by the success of archrival Argentina, the defending World Cup champions and back-to-back Copa America winners.

"It is allowed to believe," Ancelotti says in a World Cup-themed advertising campaign, acknowledging the self-doubt that has crawled into Brazil's national soccer psyche.

Neymar is back despite fitness doubts. Brazil begins its World Cup campaign at MetLife stadium in New Jersey on June 13 against Morocco, semifinalist in the 2022 World Cup. Other Group C opponents are Haiti and Scotland.

Surviving the group stage is taken for granted in Brazil — anything else would be disaster in a World Cup expanded



from 32 to 48 teams. How deep Brazil can go against stronger opponents in the knockout phase is less obvious.

"I am aware and reliant that this team can compete against the best in the world. Can we win the World Cup and reach the final? Yes, we can reach the final. But I don't know if that is enough, it is best for

us to get there and win the final," Ancelotti said on May 18.

One of the biggest questions facing Ancelotti is what to do with 34-year-old Neymar, who was Brazil's brightest star until he moved to the big-spending Saudi league in 2023. He hardly played there due to a string of knee injuries, and last year returned to boyhood club Santos in Brazil, where he dealt with even more injuries.

Ancelotti included Neymar in his World Cup squad despite concerns about his fitness, calling him an "important player" for the team. Barcelona winger Raphinha also sees Neymar as key to the squad, recently describing him as "the man of our sixth World Cup title."

If that happens it will be with a more structured approach than the free-flowing style of play that once made Brazil stand out in global soccer.

With a reputation as a master tactician, Ancelotti has made Brazil a team that is happy to sit back and wait for moments to attack rather than dominate ball pos-

session. He often opts for a compact 4-4-2 formation that can quickly turn into an attacking 4-2-4.

Brazil believes in Ancelotti. Brazilians are generally satisfied with Ancelotti, even though his record so far is uneven. After he took over, Brazil won two World Cup qualifiers, drew one and lost one, finishing fifth in South American qualifying after Argentina, Ecuador, Colombia and Uruguay.

In friendlies more recently, Brazil beat Croatia in 2025 — which eliminated Brazil from the 2022 World Cup in a quarterfinal shootout — but lost to 2022 runner-up France.

Former Brazil left-back Filipe Luís, who has recently started a coaching career, in April called Ancelotti "the best choice that happened" to the national team.

"It is not a sure thing we will win anything," he said. "But we needed someone big, with enough support to make decisions. A man people respect, who knows Brazil has gone through many years in

doubt for not winning the World Cup."

Ancelotti took over after a tumultuous time for Brazil.

The team had struggled in qualifying for the 2026 World Cup, losing twice to Argentina, and was knocked out by Uruguay in the quarterfinals of the 2024 Copa America. Three coaches came and left — caretakers Ramon Menezes and Fernando Diniz and full-time coach Dorival Júnior were all fired after poor results and criticism from fans.

Meanwhile, Brazil pursued Ancelotti, whose second stint at Real Madrid appeared to be heading toward an end despite the team winning both the Champions League and the Spanish league in 2024.

So confident is the Brazilian soccer confederation that it has made the right choice that it has already extended Ancelotti's contract until the 2030 World Cup.

"We have a beast taking care of our national team, a man who is respected by everyone," Luís said. "This World Cup is for us to build on that." (AP)

# Batters thrive, pacers strike: Dharamsala sets up intriguing RCB-GT battle

**DHARAMSALA, May 25:** The evidence from the three IPL matches played in Dharamsala this season suggests that it has evolved into a high-scoring venue where fast bowlers still remain relevant, a combination that could shape Tuesday's Qualifier 1 between Royal Challengers Bengaluru and Gujarat Titans.

The numbers tell the story clearly. Across the three completed matches at the HPCA Stadium this season, every first-innings total has either touched or crossed 200.

So while Dharamsala continues to offer seam movement and bounce, the old perception of it being a purely bowler-friendly venue no longer fully applies. The true carry has created conditions where batters can dominate once they survive the opening overs.

What remains unique, however, is

how the ball behaves early in the innings.

At roughly 1,450 metres above sea level, Dharamsala remains one of the few Indian grounds where fast bowlers consistently get conventional swing alongside steep carry. The cooler, thin mountain air helps seamers hit hard lengths effectively, especially with the new ball.

But unlike venues where assistance for pacers translates into low totals, Dharamsala's quick outfield and even bounce allows batters to recover rapidly after the initial movement. That pattern has repeated itself in all three matches this season: wickets and play-and-miss chances in the powerplay followed by heavy scoring once the ball softened.

The tactical battle in Qualifier 1 may therefore depend on which side max-



imises the first six overs with the ball.

On current evidence, RCB appear to hold a slight edge in those conditions.

Their pace attack, led by Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Josh Hazlewood, is built more around control, swing and hard-

length execution. These are attributes that have historically worked in Dharamsala. Bowlers capable of moving the ball under lights and varying pace intelligently have enjoyed success here even in high-scoring games.

Against Punjab Kings, RCB could defend 222 because their seamers kept striking during the chase.

GT's attack, meanwhile, arguably possesses greater raw pace, which the extra carry in Dharamsala could amplify. But one factor that may reduce their usual advantage is the limited role of spin at this venue. Rashid Khan is usually effective but this pitch will test him.

Statistical trends from recent matches here show pacers accounting for the overwhelming majority of wickets, with teams rarely turning extensively to spin

in decisive phases.

Another significant trend is toss dominance.

Chasing sides have won two of the three matches this season, largely because batting becomes easier once the ball loses shine and dew settles in. That could make bowling first the preferred option again on Tuesday night.

Overall, Qualifier 1 is unlikely to be a traditional "bowler's match" despite Dharamsala's reputation. The surface now rewards aggressive batting far more than before, but it still offers enough early movement to keep fast bowlers central to the contest.

In that regard, RCB's more rounded seam attack may give them a marginal advantage over GT in exploiting the venue's most decisive phase: the powerplay. (PTI)

## Qualifier 1: RCB's batting depth vs GT's relentless bowling machine

**DHARAMSHALA, May 25:** Royal Challengers Bengaluru's pursuit of back-to-back Indian Premier League (IPL) titles will run into the season's most disciplined bowling attack when they face Gujarat Titans in Qualifier 1 here on Tuesday, with a direct place in the final at stake.

Both teams ended the league stage on 18 points after 14 matches, but RCB claimed the top spot owing to a superior net run rate.

Royal Challengers Bengaluru and Gujarat Titans have arguably been the two most complete sides of IPL 2026, though they have taken contrasting routes to the playoffs. RCB, under skipper Rajat Patidar, built their campaign around aggressive batting and a far more reliable bowling unit than in previous seasons.

The defending champions repeatedly crossed 200 this season and benefited immensely from the experience of the iconic Virat Kohli at the top and the pace duo of Josh Hazlewood and Bhuvneshwar Kumar with the ball.

Their ability to win away from home and close out tight matches made them one of the most consistent sides of the league phase. RCB also carry the advantage of recent familiarity with conditions in Dharamsala, where they sealed a crucial win against Punjab Kings earlier this month.

GT, meanwhile, have surged into the playoffs on the back of a formidable bowling attack and a



top order that rarely allowed pressure to build. Captain Shubman Gill, the elegant Sai Sudharsan and explosive wicketkeeper-batter Jos Buttler have provided solidity and firepower in equal measure.

But it is GT's bowling that has stood out in the second half of the season. The pace trio of Mohammed Siraj, Kagiso Rabada and Prasidh Krishna has consistently struck with the new ball, while Rashid Khan and left-arm spinner R Sai Kishore have controlled the middle overs expertly.

GT head into the knockout clash with strong momentum after hammering Chennai Super Kings by 89 runs in their final league game.

**Match-ups in Qualifier 1**

The contest could eventually hinge on a handful of key match-ups.

Kohli against Protea pace ace

Rabada promises to be one of the defining battles of the evening, especially with the extra bounce available in Dharamsala. Kohli's ability to negotiate the early burst from GT's quicks could shape RCB's powerplay.

Similarly, Phil Salt's attacking intent against Siraj, who knows the RCB setup intimately after previous seasons with the franchise, could dictate the early tempo. Salt is back to compete in the play-offs after flying back to treat his finger injury. He lends solidity to RCB line-up.

At the other end, Hazlewood and Bhuvneshwar will test Gill and Sudharsan with movement under lights. RCB's seamers have enjoyed success this season by attacking the top order early, and GT's reliance on their top three makes those first six overs critical.

The middle-overs duel between Rashid Khan and RCB's right-heavy batting unit could also prove decisive, although skipper Patidar's strong game against spin gives Bengaluru an important counter-option.

With both sides evenly matched on points and packed with match-winners, Tuesday's Qualifier 1 shapes up as a battle between RCB's batting depth and GT's relentless bowling machine.

**Squads:**

**Gujarat Titans:** Shubman Gill (C), Anuj Rawat (wk), Arshad Khan, Ashok Sharma, Jos Buttler (wk), Connor Esterhuizen, Gurnoor Brar, Jason Holder, Kulwant Khejroliya, Kumar Kushagra, Mohammed Siraj, Glenn Phillips, Prasidh Krishna, Kagiso Rabada, Rashid Khan, Sai Kishore, Sai Sudharsan, Shahrulkhan, Ishant Sharma, Nishant Sindhu, Manav Suthar, Rahul Tewatia, Washington Sundar, Luke Wood, and Jayant Yadav.

**Royal Challengers Bengaluru:** Rajat Patidar (C), Tim David, Virat Kohli, Devdutt Padikkal, Philip Salt, Jitesh Sharma, Jacob Bethell, Krunal Pandya, Romario Shephard, Abhinandan Singh, Josh Hazlewood, Rasikh Salam Dar, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Suyash Sharma, Swapnil Singh, Nuwan Thushara, Venkatesh Iyer, Jacob Duffy, Mangesh Yadav, Jordan Cox, Vicky Ostwal, Vihaan Malhotra, Kanishk Chouhan, and Satvik Deswal.

Match starts: 7.30pm IST. (PTI)

## Gill-Sudharsan finest batting pair in history IPL: Raina

**NEW DELHI, May 25:** Former India cricketer Suresh Raina has rated Gujarat Titans openers Shubman Gill and Sai Sudharsan as the finest batting pair in the history of IPL and lauded the duo's "remarkable" consistency.

Gill and Sudharsan have formed one of IPL's most prolific opening partnerships.

After a stellar last season, Gill and Sudharsan continued their record-breaking run in IPL 2026. The GT opening pair entered an elite list in T20 cricket history registering their 10th century stand together, equalling the all-time record jointly held by the legendary pairs of Chris Gayle-Virat Kohli, Babar Azam-Mohammad Rizwan and AB de Villiers-Kohli.

"Shubman Gill and Sai Sudharsan are the finest batting pair in the history of TATA IPL. In 46 innings together, they have put up 21 partnerships of 50 runs or more," Raina said on JioHotstar's 'Champions Waali Commentary'.

"The next best pair is Chris Gayle and Virat Kohli, followed by AB de Villiers and Kohli in third place. This shows the quality of Gill and Sai. They complement each other's game very well. What stands out is that they have reached 21 fifty-plus stands in just 46 innings - the fastest in IPL history. Gayle and Kohli took 59 innings to get there, while ABD and Kohli needed 76 innings."

Hailing the duo's consistency upfront, Raina said what stands out is their game awareness.



"The consistency of Gill and Sudharsan as an opening pair is remarkable. They take time to build their innings, keep dot balls to a minimum, and complement each other's game perfectly. They pick the right bowlers to target. One uses the pace of the bowler, while the other uses the angle to create room for his shots."

"Both are extremely fit, and their game awareness stands out. They know which shots to play and when to attack. The biggest strength is how consistently they score runs. No other batting pair in the IPL this season has matched their level of consistency," he noted.

Former India pacer Umesh Yadav too was full of praise for Gill-Sudharsan pair.

"We've seen how well these two batters handle the powerplay. They don't go for high-risk shots. They bat so smoothly that you feel the runs aren't coming," he said.

"But when the powerplay ends, you suddenly notice they've already put 60 on the board. That's their class. They play according to their strengths and according to the nature of the pitch." (PTI)

## Criticism justified, I haven't performed well: D Gukesh

**OSLO, May 25:** Reigning world champion D Gukesh is not ruffled by the barrage of criticism that has come his way in the past 18 months as the young Indian Grandmaster believes all of it is justified given his underwhelming form.

Gukesh, who will turn 20 on May 29, is here to compete in the Norway Chess Tournament and opens his campaign against Germany's Vincent Keymer on Monday. He would be eager to turn things around and log some strong results in the lead-up to his world title defence against challenger Javokhir Sindarov later this year.

"Most of it (critical comments made by former greats) I don't see, but there are some that I have heard and I think it's fair," said Gukesh on Sunday.

"I have not been performing well in the last one-and-a-half year and I think I would say that my performances have been way below expectations. They (critics) have the right to say what they feel and I have the right to do my best," added the reticent teenager while seated alongside one of his critics, former world champion Magnus Carlsen.

The world number one Carlsen is chasing a record-extending eighth Norway Chess title on home soil.

This year, Gukesh finished 10th at the Tata Steel Chess Tournament, followed it up with a ninth-place finish at the Prague International Chess Festival, and most recently finished sixth at the Superbet Rapid & Blitz Poland on the Grand Chess Tour.

He pulled out of all classical events on the Grand Chess Tour and, for now, will play only in Norway Chess and the Chess Olympiad before his World Championship title clash against Sindarov.

Due to his prolonged poor form, Gukesh's world title win in 2024 against China's Ding Liren has been underplayed by the likes of Russian GM Ian Nepomniachtchi, who feels the Indian just "plays badly" at times.



Former world champion Anatoly Karpov has gone to the extent of saying that Gukesh won the coveted crown "by accident". Carlsen has also repeatedly questioned the quality of chess played during the 2024 title clash in Singapore.

Gukesh's challenger for the crown, Sindarov is also in Oslo and will no doubt be keen to closely study the Indian's game ahead of their much-anticipated showdown later this year.

"Yes, Norway Chess and the Olympiad are the two tournaments I will be playing, there are more which I am considering," said Gukesh, without elaborating his plans.

Gukesh said he would be happy to play the World Championship match anywhere in the world, but acknowledged that it would be special if it was to be held in India, even though the pressure of defending the title at home would be immense.

"Anywhere would be nice... In India there's always a lot of pressure. The World Championships will attract a lot of (attention). If it's in India it will be supercool and I will be very happy," he added.

Gukesh agreed that winning the World Championship for the first time and defending it require completely different mindsets but conceded that retaining the title is tougher than winning it. (PTI)

## Wife alleges online abuse after Head's tiff with Kohli

**SYDNEY, May 25:** Australian cricketer Travis Head's wife, Jessica, has alleged that her social media feed has been flooded by abusive comments after her husband got embroiled in an on-field spat with Indian superstar Virat Kohli during an IPL match.

Head's Sunrisers Hyderabad defeated Kohli's Royal Challengers Bengaluru by 55 runs in the game played in Hyderabad on Friday last week. Kohli and Head exchanged words during a confrontation before the former declined the traditional post-match handshake with the Australian. Jessica said her social media accounts have been bombarded with abusive comments ever since.

"It feels like a repeat of the abuse that happened after the World Cup," Jessica told 'The Adelaide Advertiser', referring to the 2023 World Cup final in which Australia defeated India with Head playing a stellar knock of 137 that earned him the player of the match award in the six-wicket win. (PTI)

## Physios felt injury won't aggravate: Rahane on Varun playing with fractured toe

**KOLKATA, May 25:** Kolkata Knight Riders captain Ajinkya Rahane said the decision to continue playing mystery spinner Varun Chakaravathy despite a fractured left toe was taken only after clearance from the medical staff.

Chakaravathy suffered a hairline fracture earlier this month during KKR's clash against Sunrisers Hyderabad when a straight drive from Ishan Kishan struck his shoe. It was the third fracture the spinner sustained this season, having earlier played through two finger fractures on his non-bowling left hand.

"See, our team's physios and the physios of BCCI and the Indian team, there was a discussion among them. I don't get involved in that at all. That's their department. My department is how's the player's mindset, does the player want to play or not, how big is the risk?" Rahane told reporters after KKR's final league match on Sunday.

"Yes, it's important to consider the health factor, to stay fit. Your injuries shouldn't increase. Yes, we think about that. But the physios felt that his injuries won't increase."

Despite the fracture, Chakaravathy continued to

play for KKR.

As a centrally contracted India player, Chakaravathy's injury management involved close coordination between the KKR medical staff, the BCCI's Centre of Excellence and the Indian team physios.

There is a standard protocol under which franchises keep the BCCI informed about the condition of centrally-contracted players, especially when there is a risk of aggravating injuries.

Rahane said Chakaravathy's willingness to continue despite the pain reflected his commitment to the team.

"Varun was eager to play. And he gets all the credit because in that injury, you show how important the team is for you. Varun was completely ready. Yes, we had to give him a break in one match because he was in a lot of pain. But he thought he could play. That communication came from him," Rahane said.

"When a player says he can play, it sends a positive message to the physios and the team that he wants to play. He showed his eagerness to play. And the injury risk management was done by the physios. They thought the injury wouldn't increase," he added. (PTI)



## It's up to others to chase world No 1 spot now: Magnus Carlsen

**OSLO, May 25:** World No. 1 Magnus Carlsen sounded less dismissive than detached while reflecting on his gradual shift away from classical chess, making it clear that after more than a decade at the summit, his priorities have evolved even though his dominance has not faded.

The Norwegian great said that after conquering classical chess, he now derives greater joy from rapid and blitz, while reminding the current generation that they must first climb the mountain he scaled and survive the unforgiving grind of elite classical battles before questioning his priorities.

Carlsen added that he now prefers a "steadier diet" of every format the game has to offer.

"So there is at least some data to suggest that the rating that I have (in classical chess) now is fairly reasonable," said Carlsen, who is chasing a record-extending eighth title at Norway Chess, while also reminding that despite drifting away from classical chess, he remains the benchmark the world is still



chasing.

"And then, yeah, to kind of maintain that level, the times that I play classical, it's kind of up to the others to make a run... and get that first place on the world rankings," he said.

"That's for my priorities. I generally prefer faster formats, at least like a steadier diet of that, but I enjoy everything," added the

Norwegian, who as recently as last year won both the World Rapid and Blitz crowns despite the rise of a fearless younger generation.

Carlsen has distanced himself from the classical World Championship cycle largely because of fading motivation, the exhausting demands of opening preparation and a growing dissatisfaction with the format.

Having dominated classical chess and held the undisputed world title for a decade, he has often said the excitement and personal meaning of defending the crown had gradually disappeared.

Even as he edges closer to Garry Kasparov's legendary 20-year reign as world No. 1 -- a mark Carlsen is roughly five years away from matching -- the Norwegian insisted he is not chasing records anymore, recalling how his attempt to breach the mythical 2900 rating barrier ultimately fell short.

"I think the one time I talked about getting a record, it was 2900, and that didn't go very well. I'm kind of giving up that hope.

So other records, I don't know, I don't play a ton of classical chess.

"But it seems that ever since the Qatar Masters in 2013, all of my performances have been in the same range kind of. Now it's about the right doses (of different formats)."

Carlsen also backed innovations aimed at making chess more entertaining, saying formats such as Armageddon tie-breakers at Norway Chess add much-needed drama and reduce the monotony of draws.

"When Germans were removed from chess (for a brief period after World War II), there was an outrage. When time was shortened from two and a half to two hours, there was outrage about that as well.

"But times are changing, and I think we want to have a balance between trying to have the best possible play, but also to allow some room for making mistakes."

He added that with modern-day preparation becoming increasingly sophisticated, two hours of thinking time per player was more than sufficient. (PTI)