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PERSPECTIVE

A calm mind can handle every storm.

Mann Ki Baat: PM Modi Praises Manipur Women Entrepreneurs Driving Grassroots Change

NEW DELHI
Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday highlighted the achievements of women entrepreneurs from Manipur during his monthly radio programme Mann Ki Baat, underlining how traditional knowledge combined with a modern outlook can foster economic empowerment and social transformation.

The Prime Minister said Mann Ki Baat has become a platform to showcase individuals who, through innovation and perseverance, are strengthening local economies while preserving traditional arts and skills. In this context, he cited the work of grassroots entrepreneurs from the northeastern state as inspiring examples of community-led development.

Modi referred to Margaret Ramtharsiem from Churachandpur district, who began her journey as a handicraft artist before expanding her vision to promote Manipur's traditional products, including handicrafts and items made from bamboo and wood. Her initiative has since grown into a successful enterprise that employs more than 50 local artisans and has found markets across several states, including Delhi.

The Prime Minister also highlighted the story of Chokhone Krichena from Senapati district, who comes from a family with deep roots in traditional farming. By diversifying into floriculture, Krichena transformed her interest into a sustainable livelihood model that links local produce with wider markets, strengthening economic resilience in the region.

WHO SAID WHAT



It is heartening to see Tamil becoming popular among the people of Kashi, which was clearly seen during Kashi Tamil Sangamam.

~ Narendra Modi, PM

Assam fastest-growing state economy over five years: RBI data

NEW DELHI
Assam has emerged as India's fastest-growing state economy over the past five years, underscoring the Northeast's rising role in the country's overall growth trajectory, according to data from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

RBI figures on Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) at constant prices show that Assam's economy expanded by 45 per cent between FY20 and FY25—the highest among major states and well above the national average for the same period.

The state's GSDP rose from Rs 2.4 lakh crore in FY20 to Rs 3.5 lakh crore in FY25, driven by steady performance in agriculture, oil and gas, and a sharp uptick in infrastructure investment across the Northeast.

Assam's strong showing reflects a broader shift in India's growth pattern, with economic expansion increasingly being powered by multiple regions rather than remaining concentrated in a few traditional hubs.

At the national level, India's real GDP grew by 29 per cent over five years, ris-



ing from Rs 145.35 lakh crore in FY20 to Rs 187.97 lakh crore in FY25. Against this backdrop, RBI data indicate that the ten fastest-growing major state economies recorded growth rates of up to 45 per cent, comfortably outpacing the national average.

Tamil Nadu ranked second, registering 39 per cent growth as its GSDP increased from Rs 12.4 lakh crore to Rs 17.3 lakh crore, supported by a strong manufacturing base across automobiles, electronics, textiles and services. Karnataka

followed with 36 per cent growth, with its economy expanding from Rs 11.5 lakh crore to Rs 15.7 lakh crore, anchored by technology services, startups, biotechnology and advanced manufacturing.

Uttar Pradesh posted 35 per cent growth over the five-year period, with GSDP rising from Rs 11.7 lakh crore to Rs 15.8 lakh crore, backed by its large domestic market, agriculture and expanding industrial and logistics infrastructure. Rajasthan recorded 34 per cent growth as its economy grew from Rs 6.8 lakh crore

to Rs 9.1 lakh crore, led by mining, renewable energy, tourism and cement production. Bihar and Andhra Pradesh both registered 33 per cent growth. Bihar's GSDP increased from Rs 4.0 lakh crore to Rs 5.3 lakh crore, driven largely by agriculture and services, while Andhra Pradesh's economy expanded from Rs 6.5 lakh crore to Rs 8.7 lakh crore, supported by agriculture, ports, logistics and food processing.

Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand recorded 31 per cent growth each. Chhattisgarh's economy rose from Rs 2.5 lakh crore to Rs 3.3 lakh crore on the back of mining, power generation and steel, while Jharkhand's GSDP increased from Rs 2.3 lakh crore to Rs 3.0 lakh crore, supported by minerals and heavy industries. Telangana rounded out the top ten with 30 per cent growth, as its GSDP climbed from Rs 6.4 lakh crore to Rs 8.4 lakh crore, driven by information technology, pharmaceuticals and urban services.

With Assam topping the growth chart, the latest RBI data point to a clear rebalancing of India's economic momentum, firmly placing the Northeast on the national growth map.

Amit Shah in Assam for Two-Day Visit, Project Launches Ahead

NEW DELHI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah is scheduled to arrive in Assam on the night of December 28 for a two-day visit during which he will inaugurate a series of major infrastructure and cultural projects in Guwahati and Nagaon, besides addressing a public gathering, officials said on Saturday.

After landing in Guwahati, Shah will stay overnight at the state guest house in Koinadhana. On December 29, he will pay homage at the newly constructed Swahid Smarak Kshetra, a memorial dedicated to the martyrs of the Assam Movement against infiltration.

The Home Minister will



then travel to Batadrava Than in Nagaon district,

the birthplace of Vaishnav saint Srimanta Sankardeva, where he will inaugurate the redevelopment project of the historic religious site. Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has earlier said the state government restored the sanctity and grandeur of Batadrava Than after removing encroachments, describing the project as a symbol of the government's resolve to protect Assam's cultural heritage.

Later in the day, Shah will return to Guwahati to inaugurate the new building of the Guwahati Police Commissionerate along with an Integrated Command and Control System (ICCS), aimed at strengthening the city's law enforcement and

surveillance capabilities. The ICCS will integrate and monitor more than 2,000 CCTV cameras across the city to improve real-time monitoring and emergency response.

In a post on X, Chief Minister Sarma said the inauguration of the Police Commissionerate and ICCS would mark a significant boost to public safety and urban security in Guwahati.

The Home Minister is also scheduled to inaugurate the Jyoti Bishnu Cultural Complex, a newly built auditorium in Guwahati with a seating capacity of 5,000. Shah will address a public rally at the venue before concluding his visit and returning to New Delhi.

Dense fog grips Tripura, IMD issues yellow alert amid prolonged cold spell

AGARTALA

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has issued a yellow alert for Tripura as cold winter conditions accompanied by dense fog are set to persist across the state over the next few days.

According to IMD Agartala, minimum temperatures are likely to remain around 12.8 degrees Celsius, with little variation expected over the next three days. Dense fog is forecast during night and early morning hours, lingering until around 11 am in several areas. Visibility in isolated pockets may drop below 50 metres, the weather office warned.

The IMD cautioned that poor visibility could disrupt transportation services, particularly early-morning flights, which may face delays or rescheduling. Similar foggy conditions



and stable winter temperatures are expected to continue for up to a week.

Meteorologists attributed the prevailing weather pattern to northerly and northwesterly winds affecting the region, bringing typical winter conditions for this time of year.

A yellow alert remains in force across Tripura, warning of dense to very dense fog in isolated areas until January 1. Authorities have advised commuters and travellers to exercise caution, especially during late-night and early-morning hours, and to take necessary safety measures while on the road.

Sonowal Warns Against BJP Infighting Before Assembly Elections



NEW DELHI

Union Shipping Minister Sarbananda Sonowal on December 27 urged Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders and workers in Assam to maintain unity and organisational discipline as the party gears up for the 2026 Assembly elections.

Addressing the BJP's state executive meeting, Sonowal cautioned against complacency and internal discord, saying the party was entering the next election cycle "from a position of strength" but could not afford divisions within its ranks. He expressed confidence that the BJP would secure a third consecu-

tive term in the state, citing the performance of the party-led governments at the Centre and in Assam over the past decade.

"Regarding the 2026 Assembly elections, we are heading in from a position of strength. But everyone must remain restrained and disciplined," Sonowal said. "The people are with us, but there should be no infighting within our own party."

The Union minister said the BJP's ascent in Assam represented a decisive break from what he described as decades of neglect and instability under previous Congress governments. For nearly 60 years, he said, Assam and the wider Northeast were denied peace, development and dignity, a situation that began to change only after Prime Minister Narendra Modi made the region a national priority.

Sonowal said peace and stability returned to Assam after the BJP formed the government in 2016, attributing the shift to sustained dialogue, firm administrative action and the signing of multiple peace accords. He also highlighted the Prime Minister's frequent visits to the Northeast and the regular presence of Union ministers in the region, which he said marked a departure from what he termed a "Lutyens Delhi-centric" approach to governance.

Calling for strict organisational discipline, Sonowal reminded party workers of the BJP's core principle: "Nation comes first, the party second and self last."

Ibobi Singh Asserts Congress Will Restore Peace, Says BJP Rule in Manipur Not Permanent

IMPHAL

Manipur Congress Legislature Party (CLP) leader and former chief minister Okram Ibobi Singh on Saturday stated that the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) rule at both the Centre and in Manipur is "not permanent," asserting that peace and coexistence would return once the Congress is strengthened.

Speaking at the 140th foundation day celebrations of the Indian National Congress, Singh said the BJP's tenure in power would not last indefinitely. "BJP is not permanent. How long will they govern? Let us wait and see," he remarked, urging citizens to look forward to upcoming elections.

The three-time former chief minister criticized the state administration, claiming that several government departments in Manipur have become ineffective over the past three years. He also expressed concern over the state's financial condition, which he said is "nearly collapsed" under the current government.

Singh underscored that only a progressive Congress government at both the Centre and the state could ensure harmony and stability. "Peace and coexistence can only come when the Congress party is strengthened," he added. Manipur Congress president Keisham Meghachandra, also present at the event, stressed the importance of maintaining



party ideology and discipline among leaders and workers. He expressed confidence that a Congress-led government could bring peace and development to the state, asserting, "Congress will definitely come to power in

the 2027 state elections." The leaders used the occasion to reiterate their commitment to restoring stability and progress in Manipur while energizing party workers for the forthcoming electoral battle.

Rajib Saha
Member Organising Committee, NEIR 2026
www.northeastintegrationrally.in



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THE GOD OF NOT-SO-SMALL THINGS

The spiritual tech market in India is booming. According to some estimates, it is likely to reach a value of around USD 58 billion by 2030. The trend gained momentum during the Covid era, with apps delivering spiritual and religious services to the screen. It has become possible to do a puja or a havan virtually. While such apps have their uses, they do not substitute the actual experience. Pilgrims have found epiphanies during arduous journeys.

The use of artificial intelligence tools has added a new dimension to religious study and practice. Thanks to open-source AI models, chatbots are ready to answer religious questions. With AI Vedas, Deen Buddy, AI Buddha and Text with Jesus now available, almost every religion has acquired AI avatars. Their accessibility and speedy responses may lead users to revere them as they would a preceptor or guru.

The integration of AI in religious services has become increasingly commonplace. Robots have been used to deliver Sunday sermons. Confessions are enabled and counselling offered through robots. This generation of digital natives are comfortable turning to chatbots for advice. 'Faith as a service' is available on demand.

Two distinct characteristics of the present age are algorithm-driven predictability and a tendency to seek validation. Predictability does not factor in the concept of free will and continues to engage the user with familiar content. The way validation works is by affirming the beliefs of a user, even though it may be illogical. To a vulnerable user who perhaps doubts the authority of existing institutions, these computational outputs may appear as the truth, and nothing but the truth.

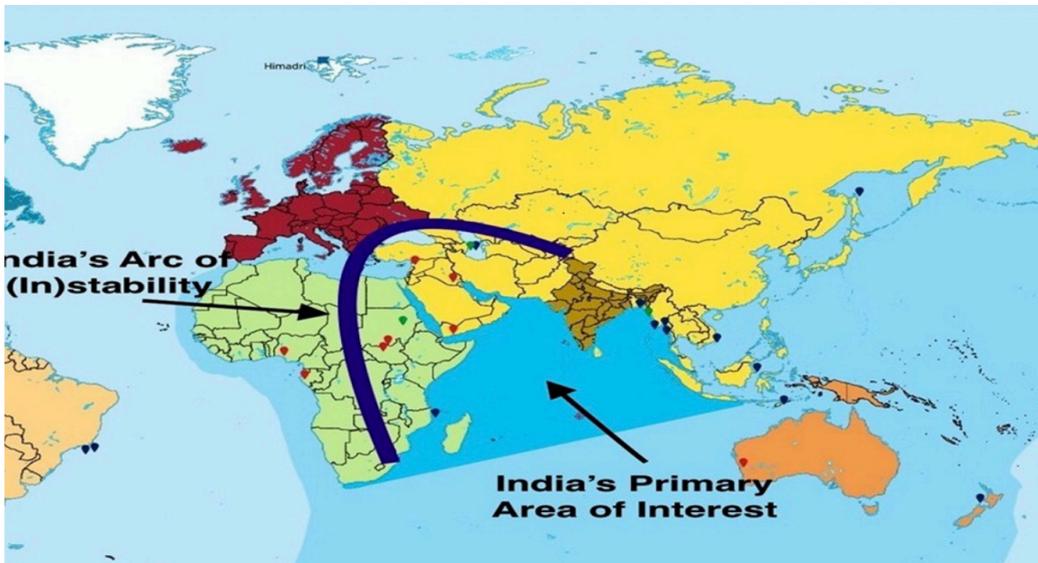
The question that arises is whether the high-level computing resources used by AI should be directed to areas like religion, which are not essentially data-driven. Or is it necessary to confine AI to areas like scientific research or augmenting productivity. It is unlikely that AI can grasp the meaning of the sacred, which has an emotional component. It is said that the Buddha's response to certain questions was transformative silence. It is doubtful if any AI tool would be capable of conveying this noble silence. Religion is essentially a system of beliefs that addresses some of the most perplexing situations in human existence. When a chatbot gives answers on human experience, it would not be based on experiential knowledge. Further, many religious practices are community-based. When people begin to engage with personalised religious chatbots, they could lose the organic connection to other participants in the quest. There is a Zulu saying that underlines the Ubuntu philosophy, "A person is a person because of other people."

Except in the EU, development of AI in most countries is unregulated. AI venturing into religion may prove to be a tool for indoctrination. Religion has the potential to anchor human beings to core values, giving them an ethical framework. However, throughout history, religion has also triggered wars, incited brutality and ignited passions. It has been worn as a badge of identity and followers openly declare their faith even today. Religious leaders have weighed in on AI's influence. The Sankaracharya of Sringeri recently said that dharma, meaning right conduct, continues to be relevant in the age AI. Pope Leo XIV has urged AI developers to bring in "moral discernment" to their work. Religious AI tools should have the right incentive structure, which prioritises ethics, tolerance and coexistence for human good. This is necessary considering the potential reach of the technology. The responsibility is, therefore, on those training AI models to bring into the architecture such beneficial incentive structures. Without oversight, AI could become a source of misinformation or prove to be snake oil. Religions are often a product of existential crises, seeking answers to questions of life and death, good and evil, and human suffering. AI trained on swathes of data can respond to many questions with some degree of plausibility. What it lacks is the lived experience of religious thinkers and savants. It may simulate suffering, although its machine-existence gives it immunity. Further, it could hypothetically continue to exist forever, possessing the immortality that many humans aspire for. This may be misinterpreted as a sign of transcendence. It is highly possible that AI, especially generative AI, will birth cults, create false prophets and proffer slick solutions as user interactions increase. AI, besides being an enabler of religious study or instruction, could also carve for itself the position of a religion. A Silicon Valley engineer in 2017 started a church, The Way of the Future, where the godhead was AI. Although the church was wound up, it later revived with a small following. But the idea it perpetrates is that of an omniscient entity with an array of capabilities including control, execution and destruction. The dazzling possibilities of AI points towards an infinitude. Some enthusiasts believe that AI will acquire a consciousness in the future. However, questions regarding the nature of human consciousness are themselves unresolved. Machines may not become self-aware because of their computational prowess—thinking involves not merely active assimilation, but also passive reflection. It's worthwhile to remember the words of Emily Bender, who said that AI tools can be "stochastic parrots".

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"There is no failure. You either win or you learn." - Gary Keller

INDIA'S WEST PATH TO BREAK GEOPOLITICAL GRIP



PITAR OPALINSKI

India's increased involvement in Afghanistan and its consistent pursuit of developing cooperation with Iran and Central Asian states are part of a broader strategy for balancing a geopolitical environment increasingly shaped by China's growing power. This pivot to the West is becoming a tool for overcoming asymmetries and a response to Chinese actions perceived as building a "ring" or "string of pearls" around India.

In recent years, Beijing has strengthened its influence in India's immediate vicinity: from Sri Lanka and Maldives to Bangladesh and Nepal. China's trade with Bangladesh reached \$17-22 billion, its share of capital in Lanka's debt was 20%, and infrastructure investments in Nepal nearly doubled. Besides, Pakistan's increasingly close cooperation with China—based on military and economic components, particularly related to development of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor—increased strategic pressure on India to the west and north.

Delhi needs a strategic "second circle": a space that will make its trade routes independent from its neighbours, increase its logistical resilience, and hinder geopolitical encirclement. This logic is not new. The ancient concept of Raja mandala, described in the Arthashastra, envisaged building alliances beyond the immediate neighbourhood—especially when neighbours are hostile.

Indian history has repeatedly demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach: the Delhi Sultanate used alliances with the Deccan to counteract pressure from the north; and in 1970s, India turned to Soviet Union to balance the US and China influence. Today, Delhi is using this logic again. By intensifying its relations with Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, it seeks to build strategic depth and expand its maneuver space beyond the area where Sino-Pakistani pressure is most felt.

A key element of India's strategy to escape the continental "squeeze" is Chabahar Port, India's largest infrastructure investment outside its borders in years, and its significance extends far beyond logistics. The port integrates India with the International North-South Transport Corridor—a multimodal transport network connecting it with Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia, with branches reaching the Caucasus, Central Asia and Europe. Chabahar offers a viable alternative to routes through Pakistan, where tensions with Afghanistan and India significantly hamper goods' transit.

The project, however, is not without risks. These include

tensions related to sanctions on Iran, Beijing's pressure on Tehran, and the uncertain situation in Afghanistan. Despite these challenges, Chabahar remains a structural investment—one of the few projects changing the geopolitical map of Indo-Eurasia and serving as a key tool for stabilizing transport routes and establishing new channels of influence in the region.

A year after the US withdrew from Afghanistan, agreements granting India operational access to the Ayni and Parkhor air bases in Tajikistan expired, weakening its ability to project power in the region. In response, New Delhi intensified its functional diplomacy, maintaining working relationships, strengthening economic influence, and ensuring basic security conditions for investment.

The priority goal was to block the possibility of using Afghanistan both as a strategic depth for Pakistan and as a base of operations for terrorist groups operating against India. Since 2022, technical dialogue with Taliban has resulted in declarations of non-support for such groups. In parallel, Delhi has consistently developed software power. Projects in healthcare, education, pharmaceuticals, and food security, as well as visa facilitation for Afghans, strengthen India's image and increase local dependence on its presence.

The turning point was the first recent official visits of Taliban representatives to Delhi: Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and Commerce Minister Nooruddin Azizi. Reactivation of Indian embassy in Kabul, resumption of air links, and cooperation in healthcare, hydropower, and sports were agreed. Azizi presented a package of incentives for Indian investors: five-year tax breaks, minimal (1%) customs duties, and priority access to land leases in sectors such as mining, pharmaceuticals, and hydropower.

Afghanistan remains an area of strategic importance yet burdened by uncertainty. Despite lack of formal recognition, India-Taliban relations are deepening, serving as tool for risk management and regaining strategic space. Reactivation of a limited diplomatic presence in Kabul allows for continuation of development projects but doesn't eliminate risks related to competition from China or potential destabilising actions by Pakistan.

The escalating conflict between Taliban government and Islamabad is indirectly fostering rapprochement between Afghanistan and India, increasing Delhi's manoeuvrability in the region. Pakistan perceives India's presence in Afghanistan as a threat, accusing it of supporting terrorist organisations such as the Tehrik-i-Tali-

ban Pakistan (TTP) and Baloch separatists, further complicating regional security dynamics.

Afghanistan is becoming a battleground for access to Central Asia, where transportation infrastructure serves to build political influence. The most dynamically developing corridor is the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan, supported by China and linked to the CPEC. It shortens transit to approximately five days and strengthens Pakistan's role as a logistics hub, deepening Afghanistan's dependence on Beijing and Islamabad.

Central Asia offers India some room to maneuver, particularly in sectors that don't conflict with China's interests, although Beijing's economic and infrastructural presence in the region remains a significant factor limiting its freedom of action. The region's states pursue multi-vector policies, seeking partners who do not impose hegemonic conditions. India is perceived here as stable, predictable, and offering cooperation based on education, skills transfer, and technology.

It encompasses several key areas—projects in ICT; educational initiatives related to IITs being implemented; bilateral trade exceeds \$2 billion, with investments concentrated in energy sector, among others. Although India does not fully constitute a geopolitical counterweight to China, it can play a balancing role in selected sectors, increasing the flexibility of the region's multi-vector policies.

A discreet competition for resources, energy access, and political influence is underway in Central Asia. Russia is trying to maintain its traditional sphere of influence, China is expanding the BRI, and Turkey is developing pan-Turkish cooperation. Beijing is responding to India's actions by strengthening cooperation with Iran—primarily in energy sector—and expanding the China-Pakistan CPEC corridor. It aims to maintain its advantage in the southern section of Eurasian trade routes and limit India's room for manoeuvre.

Islamabad perceives India's presence in Iran and Afghanistan as a threat to its strategic depth. The weakening importance of transit routes through Afghanistan, reduces Pakistan's role as a link between South and Central Asia and Middle East. In response, Pakistan has engaged in diplomatic and intelligence activities aimed at restoring its influence in Afghanistan and controlling the Taliban's relations with Delhi.

Islamabad is balancing Chinese interests with its own strategic autonomy in the region, leveraging its influence channels to maintain independence in key political and economic

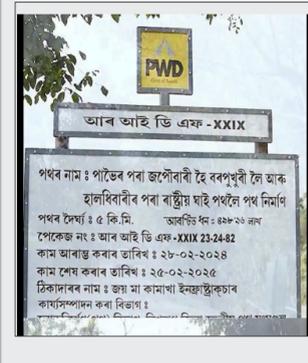
decisions. China and Pakistan's actions must also be understood in the context of broader regional rivalry, including the growing presence of India and the US in South and Central Asia.

India's Western shift is the result of the collaboration of several key power centers, each interpreting it through the prism of its own priorities. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs views this strategy as a tool

DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

Driving Assam forward □ From villages to cities, our modern roads & bridges are making travel smoother than ever. Education, healthcare, business ~ you name it, everything's faster, easier and more accessible. The impact: Time saved, lives improved, economy stirred.

~ **Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, CM, Assam**



for political diversification, allowing India to expand its influence beyond its immediate neighborhood and reduce its dependence on Sino-Pakistani pressure.

The NSC sees the pivot as an instrument to manage the risks associated with terrorism and the stability of Afghanistan, which remains a crucial element of regional security. The Indian Army sees the Western vector as an opportunity to relieve the Himalayan front by shifting its strategic attention to new operational areas. In turn, the ruling BJP sees this orientation as evidence of India's growing position in the global system, its ability to shape its own geopolitical space and build a soft power, power on the international stage.

The shift, a process that has been ongoing since the middle of last decade, is result of an integrated approach by various centers of power, skillfully combining the priorities of security, the economy, and India's global image

EC releases Assam draft electoral rolls, over 10.56 lakh names dropped ahead of Assembly polls

GUWAHATI

The Election Commission of India (ECI) on December 27 published Assam's integrated draft electoral rolls following a Special Revision exercise, revealing that the names of more than 10.56 lakh voters have been deleted ahead of the Assembly elections scheduled in less than six months.

As per the draft rolls, Assam now has a total of 2,51,09,754 electors, excluding 93,021 'D-Voters' or doubtful voters. Election officials said the deletions were carried out on grounds such as death, change of residence and the identification of duplicate or demographically similar entries during verification.

Of the total deletions, 4,78,992 names were removed due to the



death of electors, while 5,23,680 voters were found to have shifted from their registered addresses. Another 53,619 entries were flagged and deleted owing to demographic similarities and duplication, officials said.

The Special Revision was conducted through an extensive house-to-house verification exercise between November 22 and December 20, covering 61,03,103 households across the state. The process involved 35 District Election Officers, 126 Electoral Registration Officers, 1,260 Assistant EROs, 29,656 Booth Level Officers (BLOs) and 2,578 BLO Supervisors. Political parties also participated by deploying 61,533 Booth Level Agents to monitor the revision exercise.

The Election Commission clarified that the details of all

D-Voters, including their names, ages and photographs, have been carried forward unchanged in the draft rolls. D-Voters in Assam are individuals identified by Foreigners' Tribunals under the Foreigners Act, 1946, and remain disenfranchised, without voter identity cards.

Electors can file claims and objections to the draft rolls until January 22, after which the final electoral rolls will be published on February 10.

The Special Revision in Assam was undertaken even as a Special Intensive Revision is being carried out in 12 states and Union Territories, including Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, which are also due to go to the polls along with Assam.

Chief Election Commission-

er Gyanesh Kumar has earlier said that citizenship-related provisions in Assam are distinct under the Citizenship Act and that the verification process is being conducted under the supervision of the Supreme Court.

Election officials said the Special Revision exercise falls between the annual summary revision and a full-fledged Special Intensive Revision.

The ECI said the objective of the exercise is to ensure an error-free and updated electoral roll by enrolling eligible voters, correcting clerical errors, removing names of deceased or shifted electors, and eliminating duplicate entries.

Assam currently has 31,486 polling stations following nationalisation of polling booths.

Assam Cabinet clears key decisions to strengthen land rights, governance and public service

GUWAHATI

Assam Minister for Housing and Urban Affairs, Jayanta Mallabrah approved a series of decisions aimed at strengthening land rights, modernising governance, boosting infrastructure, and improving administrative and policing efficiency across the state.

According to a release, the Cabinet approved the settlement of 732 proposals for Government Khas and ceiling surplus land in Kamrup (Metro) district under Mission Basundhara 3.0, benefitting indigenous and landless families for homestead purposes. Additionally, 168 proposals under Mission Basundhara 2.0 were approved for the settlement of Government land in the same district after realisation of the applicable settlement premium. These decisions are expected to provide secure land tenure, promote housing investment, and improve access to basic civic amenities.

To modernise revenue administration, the Cabinet approved amendments to the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886, by inserting Rules 183A and 186A. The amendments will enable digital hearings, electronic submissions, and technology-driven service delivery, reducing pendency and enhancing transparency while providing legal sanctity to electronic proceedings. The move aligns Assam with the National Incentive Framework, enabling the State to avail incentives of up to Rs 150 crore.

In a significant decision to promote cultural and religious tourism, the Cabinet approved the allotment of land at Amerigog village in Sonapur in favour of Tirupati Thirumala Devasthanam, which is expected to emerge as a major spiritual and cultural centre in the North East, said the release.

Woman, 26, found dead under suspicious circumstances in Manipur's Wangoi; family alleges foul play



IMPHAL

A 26-year-old married woman was found dead under suspicious circumstances in Wangoi area of Imphal West district on December 27, triggering tension and allegations of murder from her family.

The deceased has been identified as Khaidem Chaoba Devi, wife of Nareshwor of Wangoi Mamang Khaidem. According to sources, she had been missing since December 26. Her body was recovered the following morning from inside the Ibudhou Pakhangba compound at Thiyam Leishangkhang, under the jurisdiction of Wangoi police station.

Following the recovery of the body, family members of the deceased accused her husband and others of being involved in her death. The allegations sparked public outrage in the locality, with angry relatives and locals allegedly vandalising the husband's residence.

Police personnel from Wangoi police station rushed to the spot and brought the situation under control to prevent further escalation.

Police officials said a case has been registered and an investigation is underway to determine the circumstances surrounding the woman's death and to examine the allegations made by her family. A team from the Forensic Science Laboratory has been called to the scene to collect evidence and conduct a detailed forensic examination.

Further action will be taken based on the outcome of the investigation, police said.

Arunachal: Indigenous youths hold massive rally in Itanagar against illegal immigration

ITANAGAR

Thousands of indigenous youths in Arunachal Pradesh on Saturday took out a massive torch march in Itanagar to protest alleged illegal immigration from Bangladesh, raising concerns over the protection of indigenous land, identity and national security.

The demonstration, organised jointly by the Arunachal Pradesh Indigenous Youth Organisation (APIYO), the Indigenous Youth Force of Arunachal (IYFA) and the All Naharlagun Youth Organisation (ANYO), began in the evening from the Akashdeep area and concluded at the Tennis Court in the state capital. Organisers said the rally remained peaceful throughout.

During the protest, demonstrators burnt an effigy of Bangladesh Prime Minister Muhammad Yunus along with the Bangladesh national flag, expressing strong resentment over what they described as provocative statements



from across the border.

According to the organisers, the rally was triggered by remarks attributed to Bangladeshi individuals and political leaders claiming that the Northeast is part of a so-called "Greater Bangladesh." Protesters also objected to statements suggesting that the strategic Siliguri Corridor, popularly known as the "Chicken's Neck," could be

captured to cut off the Northeast from mainland India.

The youth groups reiterated their firm opposition to illegal immigration in Arunachal Pradesh and voiced concerns over alleged unauthorised constructions, including illegal masjids, in the Itanagar Capital Region. They claimed such structures violate existing laws, threaten indige-

nous land rights and pose serious internal security risks.

Protesters also condemned the recent killing of an Indian Hindu man in Bangladesh, describing it as a mob lynching, and said the burning of the effigy reflected their anger over the incident.

APIYO president Taro Sonam Liyak told the media that comments by Bangladeshi youth leaders about integrating the Northeast with Bangladesh were unacceptable and provocative. "Such statements challenge India's sovereignty. The indigenous people of Arunachal Pradesh and the Northeast are fully capable of defending their land and identity," he said.

Liyak also criticised the Arunachal Pradesh government and the state Home Department for what he described as a failure to effectively check the influx of illegal immigrants in the sensitive border state, which shares international boundaries with China, Myanmar and Bhutan.

Meghalaya BJP calls for strict punishment for attempts to disrupt Christmas celebrations

SHILLONG

Amid reports of attempts to disrupt Christmas celebrations in parts of the country, the Meghalaya unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on December 26 demanded the strictest action against those involved, asserting that every citizen has a constitutional right to celebrate festivals freely and without fear.

State BJP chief spokesperson Mariahom Kharkrang said Christmas symbolises love, harmony and unity, and is celebrated across communities in India with equal devotion. Condemning any effort to disturb the festivities, he said it was deeply distressing that a handful of individuals were engaging in hate-driven acts aimed at disrespecting the spirit and message of Christmas.

Kharkrang said such actions run



counter to the core values of Indian civilisation and undermine the principles of harmony and coexistence that define the country. He stressed that the BJP believes firmly in the unity and equality of all religions and remains committed to upholding the Constitution and protecting

every citizen's right to celebrate festivals in accordance with their faith.

Rejecting attempts to politicise criminal incidents, the BJP leader said some parties were projecting isolated cases involving "petty criminals" as organised or coordinated acts for narrow political gains. He

warned that such narratives were misleading and risked further polarising society.

Highlighting the party's commitment to inclusivity, Kharkrang noted that the Prime Minister and senior BJP leaders have consistently participated in Christmas services over the years, including in 2025, setting an example of mutual respect and communal harmony.

He said the BJP stands with citizens across the country in demanding that those responsible for attempting to disrupt Christmas celebrations be arrested, prosecuted and punished under the strictest provisions of law.

Kharkrang added that BJP leaders and office-bearers in Meghalaya are in touch with their counterparts in states where such incidents have been reported, including Assam, to ensure accountability.

Assam Congress accuses Himanta of using 'half-truths' to polarise society, questions claims without census data



GUWAHATI

Assam Legislative Assembly Leader of Opposition and senior Congress leader Debabrata Saikia on December 27 launched a sharp attack on Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, accusing him of distorting facts and making unsubstantiated claims to polarise society.

Reacting to a recent statement by the Chief Minister, Saikia alleged that Sarma selectively uses facts and "half-truths" to suit his political narrative and does not consistently speak the truth. He questioned the basis of the CM's assertions on demographic changes, particularly in Karbi Anglong.

"How can the Chief Minister claim that the number of Karbi people has decreased while the number of non-Karbi people has increased when there has been no census in Assam?" Saikia asked, terming the remarks misleading and politically motivated.

Citing what he described as

official data available with government agencies and the state minority board, the Congress leader said indigenous Muslim communities account for around 12 to 13 per cent of the total Muslim population in Assam, which he put at about 34 per cent. He alleged that the Chief Minister was deliberately ignoring such figures to advance a divisive narrative.

"What the Chief Minister is attempting through such statements is to further polarise people and deepen communal divisions," Saikia said, adding that the remarks were unacceptable. He demanded that Sarma place verifiable data from authorised government agencies in the public domain instead of making sweeping claims.

Saikia also alleged that misinformation from the Chief Minister had increased during the ongoing political campaign. "These are lies being spread by the Chief Minister. Unfortunately, he speaks more lies than truth these days, and this tendency has become more pronounced during the campaign period," he said.

The Congress leader's remarks come amid an intensifying political confrontation in Assam over demographic issues, with the opposition accusing the BJP-led government of invoking sensitive subjects to influence public opinion ahead of upcoming elections.

Tripura LoP attacks Tipra Motha over state of education, targets Manikya dynasty for 'historic neglect'



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AGARTALA

Tripura Leader of Opposition Jitendra Chaudhury on December 27 launched a sharp attack on the Tipra Motha Party, accusing it of presiding over a collapse

of the education system in the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC), while also blaming the erstwhile Manikya dynasty for decades of neglect of mass education in the state.

Addressing a programme organised to mark Jana Shiksha Diwas in Agartala, Chaudhury alleged that Tipra Motha has failed to strengthen education in tribal areas and is instead focusing on script-related issues at the cost of students' future. He claimed the party's priorities have diverted attention from the urgent need to improve schools, teachers' recruitment and learning outcomes.

The CPI(M) leader and Tripura state secretary said Tripura's history shows that mass education was never a priority during the princely rule. He alleged that illiteracy and superstition prevailed across the state under the Manikya dynasty, and despite having the means, no serious effort was made to expand education among the people.

"Large structures like Ujjayanta Palace and Neer Mahal were built by bringing in skilled workers. If that was possible, at least a section of the population could have been educated, even considering the communication limitations of that time," Chaudhury said. He alleged that education was deliberately avoided as it empowers people with awareness, courage to protest and freedom from superstition.

Recalling the Jana Shiksha An-

dolan, Chaudhury said the movement, initiated in 1948 by 11 youths under the leadership of then chief ministers Dasharath Dev and Nripen Chakraborty, led to the establishment of around 400 schools, most of them in tribal areas. He said the movement played a transformative role in reshaping Tripura's socio-cultural space, politics and education system, producing generations of students who went on to excel in different fields.

Turning to the present situation, Chaudhury alleged that after Tipra Motha came to power in the TTAADC in 2021, it accused the Left Front government of holding back tribal students by using Bengali as a medium of instruction. He said the party subsequently declared all schools as English medium but failed to back the decision with infrastructure or manpower.

"In the last four years, there has been no recruitment of teachers and no new schools have been opened. Instead, over 1,000 schools have been shut down," he claimed. He added that nearly 95 per cent of students in villages depend on government schools, many of which now lack teachers and function neither as proper English nor Bengali-medium institutions.

Chaudhury alleged that instead of addressing these gaps, the Tipra Motha leadership is focusing on script-related debates to deflect attention from its administrative failures in the education sector.

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Tharoor calls for discipline, backs Digvijaya amid RSS praise row; Khera draws hard ideological line

Digvijay's RSS praise: Remark open dissent to Rahul Gandhi, says BJP

NEW DELHI

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Saturday responded to a social media post of Congress leader Digvijay Singh that featured a photograph showing Narendra Modi sitting on the floor near senior party leaders, saying the image reflected BJP's working culture.

Ahead of Saturday's Congress Working Committee (CWC) meeting, the Congress leader triggered a political stir by praising the organisational strength of the BJP and its ideological mentor, the RSS. Sharing an old photograph of PM Narendra Modi on social media, Singh highlighted how grassroots workers rose through the ranks to become Chief Minister and Prime Minister, calling it "the power of the organisation."

At the CWC meeting, Singh reportedly stressed the urgent need to strengthen the Congress at the grassroots, pointing out that while District Congress Committees exist on paper in Madhya Pradesh, the party lacked an active workforce. In response, Congress general secretary (organisation) K C Venugopal said state leaders also needed to play their part, while Singh acknowledged the point.

Singh's post, which tagged the official Congress handle along with party president Mallikarjun Kharge, Rahul Gandhi, and Priyanka Gandhi, caused a flutter among leaders. Several insiders said they supported his call for organisational reform.

Afterwards, Singh clarified on social media that his remarks were only about organisational strength and not an endorsement of the BJP or RSS. "You people have misunderstood things. I am a



staunch opponent of the BJP and the RSS," he wrote, adding, "I said whatever I wanted to."

BJP Rajya Sabha MP and national spokesperson Sudhanshu Trivedi said, "This is a symbol of the working style of BJP, how a person connected to the ground can reach the top with talent, capability and the support of the organisation." Referring to the photograph, Trivedi said, "This is a well-known photograph in which Advani ji is sitting on the chair, and PM Modi, who was a young Karyakarta at that time,

is sitting on the floor." He added that Digvijay Singh is a very senior leader and has been observing politics for a long time, suggesting that he might have realised this fact.

Taking a swipe at Congress party culture, Trivedi said that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is "Gudri ke Lal", while the Congress leadership is described as "Jawahar ke Lal", and both cannot be compared. "The Congress leadership have brought their party to an upside-down state, while our Prime Minister rose

from the bottom to the top and is taking the party to the top as well," he said. Taking a dig at Rahul Gandhi, Trivedi said that Digvijay Singh had questioned Gandhi's understanding. "Congress is struggling without power and after 2024 this struggle has turned into desperation and agony," he added. BJP national spokesperson, Shehzad Poonawalla also mocked Rahul Gandhi, saying, "...now even people from the party and family are expressing no-confidence against Rahul Gandhi."



NEW DELHI

Amid the political row triggered by senior Congress leader Digvijaya Singh's remarks praising the organisational strength of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Thiruvananthapuram MP and Congress leader Shashi Tharoor on Sunday came out in support of Singh, stressing the need for discipline and internal reforms within the Congress.

Tharoor said discipline was essential for any political party and that the Congress, with its long history, had much to learn from its own past. "We have a history of 140 years, and we can learn a lot from it. We can learn from ourselves, too. Discipline is very important in any party," he said. Emphasising organisational strengthening as a shared objective, Tharoor added, "Even I want our organisation to strengthen. There should be discipline in our organisation. Digvijaya Singh can speak for himself."

Backing Singh's broader argument, Tharoor said the Congress must focus on improving internal discipline and organisational strength to face political challenges more effectively. Asked whether

he had spoken to Singh after the controversy, Tharoor said conversations between them were natural. "We are friends, and having a conversation is natural. The organisation must be strengthened, there is no question about it," he said.

Singh had triggered the controversy on Saturday after sharing a 1985 photograph showing Prime Minister Narendra Modi seated on the floor near senior BJP leader L K Advani. In his post, Singh said the image reflected how grassroots workers in the RSS and the BJP could rise to top positions, describing it as the "power of organisation". Though he later clarified that he remained a strong opponent of the RSS and the BJP, the post drew sharp reactions within the party.

In contrast to Tharoor's remarks, Congress Media and Publicity Department chairman Pawan Khera took a hard line against Singh's comments, saying there was "nothing to learn from the RSS". Taking a sharp swipe, Khera linked the RSS to Nathuram Godse, who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi.

"There's nothing to learn from the RSS. What can an organisation known for Godse teach an organ-

isation founded by Gandhi?" Khera said, underlining the ideological divide within the party over Singh's remarks.

Congress leader Sachin Pilot also reiterated on Sunday that the opposition party is united, but everyone has the right to their own opinion, in response to Digvijaya Singh's remarks.

Speaking to the media, the former Rajasthan Deputy Chief Minister shared his stance on the Digvijay Singh matter regarding the RSS and PM Modi. He dispelled rumours of an internal ideological rift within the Congress.

To explain the situation, he said, "Congress party is united. The country needs a strong opposition. Our intention is to strengthen the organisation. In our party, we have the right to speak about our thoughts."

He added that Digvijaya Singh said what he wanted, but the encompassing goal of every Congress member is to strengthen the opposition leaders. "He said whatever he had to, and after that, he also gave his clarification. All the Congress leaders have only one goal to strengthen Kharge and Rahul ji," added Pilot.

INTERNATIONAL

Myanmar begins first general election since 2021 coup amid civil war and boycotts

YANGON

Military-controlled Myanmar began voting on Sunday in its first general election in five years, marking the first poll since the 2021 coup that ousted the previous civilian government.

The junta has described the election as an opportunity for political and economic renewal in the impoverished Southeast Asian nation.

Ballots were cast at high schools, government buildings, and religious institutions in Yangon, the country's largest city, the capital Naypyitaw, and other regions, according to AFP.

Voting is being conducted in three phases, with the first phase on Sunday covering 102 of the country's 330 townships.

The second and third phases are scheduled for January 11 and 25, respectively, with final results expected in late January.

Over 4,800 candidates from 57 parties are competing for seats at national and regional levels, but only six parties are contesting nationwide for seats that could influence parliamentary decisions.

Former leader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi is not participating as she is serving a 27-year prison sentence on charges widely considered politically motivated. Her party, the National League for Democracy, was dissolved in 2023 after refusing to register under the military's new rules.

Other opposition parties also declined to participate, arguing the process is unfair, and some groups have urged voters to boycott the election.

Security was visibly tightened in Yangon on Saturday, with armed personnel outside polling stations and military vehicles on patrol.



Electronic voting machines, being used for the first time in Myanmar, were installed at polling sites. Despite threats from opposition and armed groups to disrupt the process, no major incidents were reported.

Analysts have questioned the legitimacy of the vote. Amael Vier from the Asian Network for Free Elections highlighted the lack of real choice, noting that 73% of voters supported parties in 2020 that no longer exist.

Critics, including the United Nations, Western governments, and human rights organizations, have condemned the election as neither free nor fair, arguing it primarily serves to legitimize continued military rule.

The exclusion of major opposition parties, restrictions on speech, and the repressive environment have led many to predict a mili-

tary-backed victory for the Union Solidarity and Development Party, making the purported transition to civilian governance largely symbolic. However, holding elections may allow neighboring countries such as China, India, and Thailand to maintain their support, citing the process as a step toward stability.

Western countries have continued to impose sanctions on Myanmar's military leadership over its rejection of democratic norms and its violent campaign against opposition forces. Organising dissent has become extremely challenging under the junta's strict controls.

Data from the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners shows that more than 22,000 individuals are currently imprisoned on political grounds, while security forces have killed over 7,600 civilians since the military takeover

in 2021. Armed opposition groups emerged after the army responded with deadly force to peaceful demonstrations against the coup. The conflict that followed has displaced more than 3.6 million people, according to the United Nations.

The introduction of a new Election Protection Law has imposed severe punishments and tight restrictions, effectively silencing public criticism of the electoral process. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk said violence and intimidation have intensified in Myanmar, adding that the conditions necessary for free expression and peaceful protest do not exist.

Given these conditions, both supporters and critics of the military believe that power is likely to remain in the hands of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, who led the 2021 coup.

Iran's president says his country is in a 'total war' with the West



TEHRAN

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian said on Saturday his country is in a "total war" with the US, Israel and Europe ahead of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's meeting with US President Donald Trump.

Pezeshkian said in an interview published on the website of the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Saturday that the war is worse than Iran's deadly war with Iraq in the 1980s.

"In my opinion, we are at total war with the United States, Israel and Europe... They don't want our country to remain stable... They want to bring our country to its knees," Pezeshkian told the official site of Ayatollah, six months after Israel and the US launched strikes on Iran.

"This war is worse than

the one launched against us by Iraq. On closer inspection, it is far more complex and difficult," he added, referring to the 1980-88 conflict between the neighbouring countries that left more than 1 million casualties on both sides.

Pezeshkian's remarks came two days before a planned meeting between Trump and Netanyahu during Netanyahu's visit to the US. Iran is expected to be a key topic in the talks.

The United States and its allies accuse Iran of seeking to acquire nuclear weapons, a claim Tehran has repeatedly denied.

France, Britain and Germany were behind the reimposition of UN sanctions on Iran in September connected to its nuclear programme.

Earlier this year, sworn enemies Israel and Iran engaged in a 12-day war in June, triggered by

an unprecedented Israeli attack on Iranian military and nuclear sites, as well as civilian areas.

The strikes resulted in more than 1,000 casualties, according to Iranian authorities. Retaliatory missile barrages by Iran killed 28 in Israel.

The United States later joined the operation, bombing three nuclear sites.

Washington's involvement brought a halt to negotiations that began in April with Tehran over its nuclear programme. Since returning to the White House in January, US President Donald Trump has revived his so-called "maximum pressure" policy against Iran, initiated during his first term.

That has included additional sanctions designed to economically cripple the country and dry up its oil revenues from sales on the global market.

Violence and persecution normalised, Bangladesh faces grave democracy crisis



As Bangladesh gears up for its 13th national election slated in February 2026, Dhaka's political climate is marred with challenges the country has never faced before. Since August 2024, communal violence, mobocracy, ethnic attacks, the rise of Islamist extremism, systemic target of dissident voices and aggressive attempts at historical revisionism have become akin to 'new' Bangladesh. The Chief Advisor Muhammad Yunus, however, promised this election to be Bangladesh's first 'free and fair' democratic transition after 15 years.

The July Uprising, the formation of interim government, banning of Awami League and its student wing Chhatra League, received legitimacy on the ground that Sheikh Hasina, the now ousted Prime Minister, had compromised the country's democracy for 15 years.

Not just anti-Hasina forces within Bangladesh, but also her political opponents abroad (West), remained fixated on the same. Concerns were raised about the past three national elections being free and fair, while Hasina's autocratic tendencies were attributed to centralisation of power and her long incumbency, and human rights violations.

These issues were treated in isolation, stripped of its context. Hasina's Western critics often viewed Bangladesh politics through a Eurocentric prism, reducing Bangladesh's democracy challenges as a mere election issue, a turnout problem like that of Denmark.

However, Bangladesh's democracy is earned not through ballot, but through blood sacrificed by millions of Bengali population and a double partition (1947 and 1971) besides over-coming double colonisation — first from the British and then from Pakistan.

Even after the country's liberation in 1971, Bangladesh had a brief period of democracy from 1971-75, before plunging into military rule that continued till 1990. Therefore, despite the country's independent existence of 54 years, Bangladesh's democracy is new, while anti-democratic elements continue to exist.

The major challenge to the country's democratic ethos has been the Islamists that re-emerged under military rule after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination in 1975. A former collaborator of the Pakistan Army — Jamaat-e-Islami — was allowed to reorganise

itself as a religious political party in 1978 and allowed to contest national polls under Bangladesh's civilian rule. It should be noted that Jamaat-e-Islami historically opposed the 1972 Constitution, including the fundamental state principles of nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism. Instead, it advocates for an Islamic state based on Sharia, a theo-democracy that is within the Islamic framework.

Jamaat emerged as the third largest party in the country, thanks to coalition with Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and BNP-Jamaat alliance formed governments twice — 1991-06 and 2001-06.

These periods also witnessed a rise in Islamic radicalism along with a deepening governance crisis. On one hand, Islamist militant outfits like Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HuJI-B) were terrorising the nation with its arson attacks and targeted killings. On the other hand, those in power were eroding democratic norms through voter manipulation, rigged elections, political violence and rampant corruption.

Sheikh Hasina's second tenure came amidst a critical political environment that needed military intervention for the country's democratic survival. The 2008 election that brought her to power ushered a new phase of liberal democracy. Hasina's political pragmatism steered the country's economic and infrastructural growth while also enabling democratic institutional continuity by maintaining civil-military balance.

At a time when South Asian nations like Sri Lanka and Pakistan were diving into debt-crisis, Hasina kept the country's economy afloat, despite the financial challenges.

However, the most notable contribution of the Awami league-led government was Hasina's iron clad approach to tackling Bangladesh's prolonged Islamist extremism.

The new phase of Islamist extremist attacks by Neo-JMB, and Ansar-ul-Bangla Team targeting secular activists, bloggers, artists, minorities and leaders witnessed since 2013, were met with 'zero-tolerance' policy. The aggressive counter-terrorism operations nationwide through diversified security apparatus and strict laws, helped neutralise terrorist camps at the borders and attacks within the country, a move that received international praise.

It was also her tenure that gave due recognition and justice to people who suffered during the 1971 Liberation War. By reviving the International War Crimes Tribunal, Hasina ensured that collaborators of the Pakistan Army, who enjoyed protection under the predecessor government, faced trial for their war crimes. She



also gave dignified recognition to the rape survivors of 1971 as liberation fighters or war-heroines, and provided families of liberation fighters with financial allowances, scholarships and housing. Thus, it was Sheikh Hasina's tenure that restored the true legacy of 1971, albeit to the discomfort of Jamaat-e-Islami.

Sheikh Hasina's main political opponents — namely BNP and Jamaat (then in alliance) — were ideologically antithetical to her party Awami League, making the latter the country's only secular party that could form a government. Through the 15th amendment in 2011, Sheikh Hasina's government constitutionally reinstated secularism, earlier removed under Ziaur Rahman's rule in 1977, while also maintaining Islam as the state religion. Her 15-year rule provided protection to minority communities, religious persecution witnessed a significant curtailment because of protective measures undertaken by the Awami League government. Bangladeshi culture, too, was actively promoted by the government via interfaith initiatives, celebration of festivals, boosting Bangladesh's cultural revival which is pluralistic at its core.

Therefore, in more ways than one Sheikh Hasina was not only Bangladesh's stabiliser but also protector of Bangladesh's pluralism that kept Bangladesh economically and geographically predictable. Hasina was the only realistic alternative, notwithstanding her shortcomings, in a state that remained hostile to democracy, liberalism and pluralism. Even her foreign opponents know this, although they chose to downplay it.

Much of Bangladesh's current democracy crisis is this loophole — the lack of a democratic opposition. Contrary to the old belief that delegitimising a strong incumbent would restore Bangladesh's democracy and open space for credible pluralistic alternative, the present political reality reveals a known historic pattern — in a divided society, power vacuums are not filled with moderates but with conservatives, the most violent and organised forces. In Bangladesh's case, it is the Islamists.

On the political sphere, Islamists are now contesting elections and advocating to change the country's constitution to make it Sharia-based. Socially, its factions are the forces behind mob attacks, communal violence and disrupting events that observe and celebrate the country's pluralism.

This counter-revolution resulted due to chasing democratic optics, therefore, proved to be destructive missteps, a context-blind activism masquerading as a strategy of value-driven paternalism. Indeed, Sheikh Hasina was not flawless. However, state collapse is always worse than an imperfect order.

Bangladesh's democracy crisis is grave, violence and persecution became normalised, and the entire country is suffering from de-stability. Unfortunately, Bangladesh will have to pay a heavy price for this.

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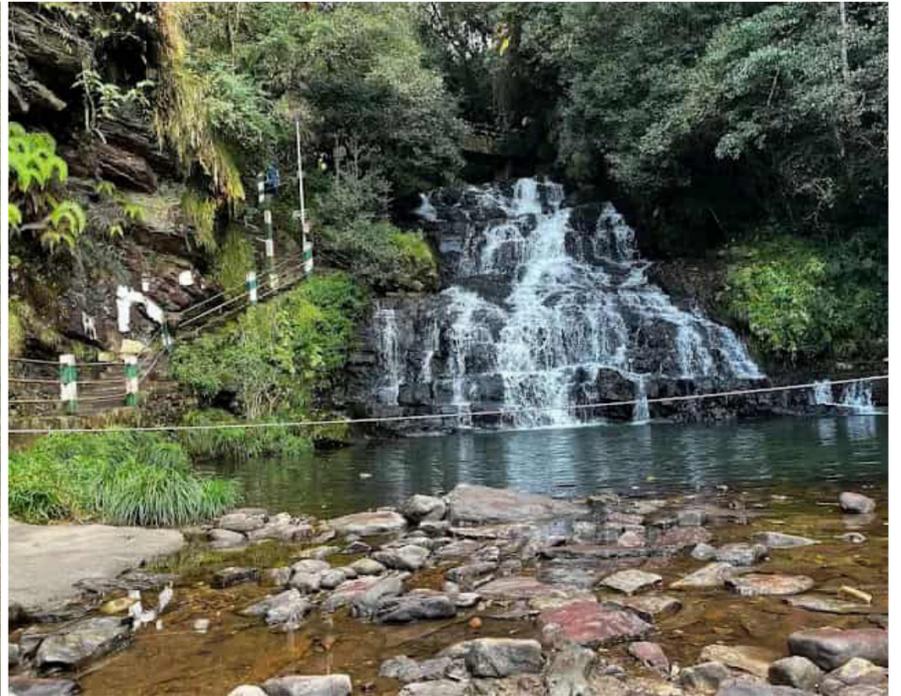
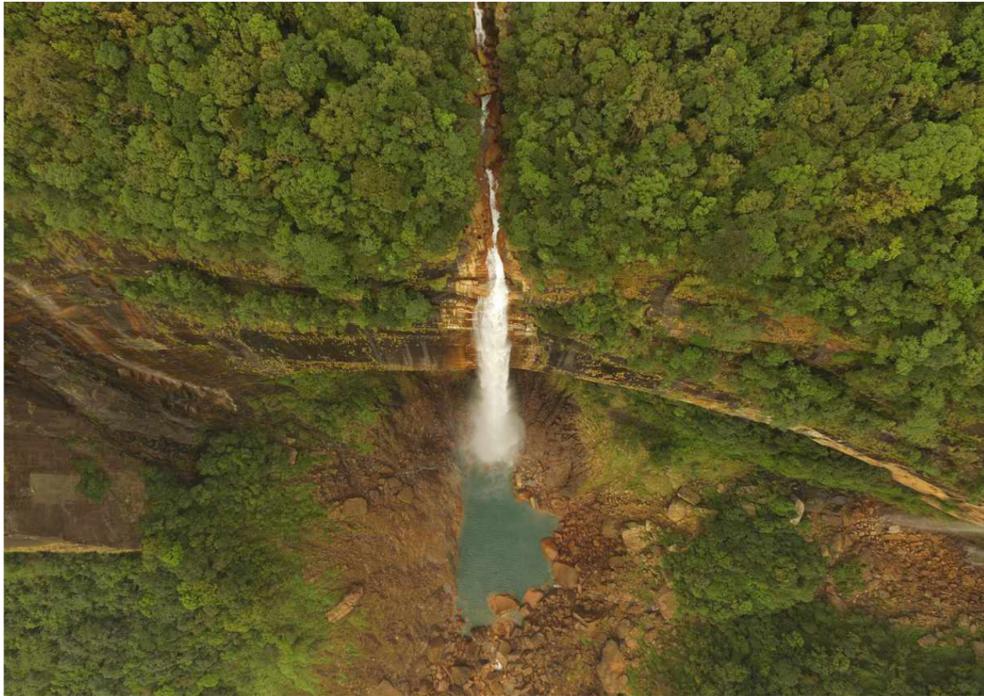
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There's No Backup Plan

Shaping Careers For a Successful Tomorrow

SHILLONG: WHERE THE CLOUDS COME HOME



SUMANA ACHARJEE

I visited Shillong for the first time in April 2025. The experience stayed with me. I was overwhelmed by its quiet beauty, mesmerised by the rhythm of the hills, and struck by how effortlessly the city balances nature, culture, and everyday life. It felt less like a destination and more like a place that invites you to slow down, observe, and listen.

There are places that charm you the moment you arrive — and then there's Shillong. I visited Shillong for the first time in April 2025, and it left me overwhelmed in the best possible way.

It doesn't try to impress you. It doesn't need to. The air itself feels alive, carrying the smell of pine, rain, and music. The city sits quietly in the heart of Meghalaya, surrounded by rolling hills that look like they've been sculpted out of mist. People call it the Scotland of the East, but that's selling it short. Shillong isn't anyone's imitation. It's a character of its own — poetic, unpredictable, and utterly human.

On most days, Shillong wakes up wrapped in fog. The clouds don't float above you; they walk beside you, brush past your shoulders, and make even the most ordinary street feel mysterious. As the morning light slowly filters through, the city reveals its colors — deep green hillsides, tin-roofed houses with flower boxes, and winding lanes that seem to lead both everywhere and nowhere.

Driving through the city is like flipping through a book written by nature and nostalgia. Pine trees line the roads, old British-era bungalows peek through gardens, and every turn opens into a new view — a waterfall, a meadow, or a

cluster of homes clinging to the slope. Even the traffic feels patient, as if time itself slows down here.

Shillong Peak, the city's highest point, offers a panoramic view that's almost cinematic. On a clear day, you can see the plains of Bangladesh stretching beyond the horizon. But most days, the clouds keep it to themselves — which is fine, because Shillong's beauty isn't in what it shows, but in what it hides.

You can't talk about Shillong without talking about music. It's not just part of the city — it is the city. Walk through Police Bazaar or Laitumkhrah on a weekend evening, and you'll hear it everywhere: a kid strumming a guitar on a balcony, a group rehearsing in a garage, an old man humming a Western classic at a roadside tea stall.

For decades, Shillong has been India's rock capital. Bands like Soulmate and legends like Lou Majaw didn't just play music — they built a culture around it. Every café and pub has a stage, every festival has an open mic, and every young person seems to know how to keep rhythm. It's not about fame or performance here. It's about joy. Music is how the city breathes.

During the Shillong Autumn Festival, Ward's Lake turns into an open-air concert ground, blending folk traditions with jazz, blues, and indie sounds. Even Christmas here feels like a musical — carols echo through every church and street, candles flicker in windows, and the whole city hums in harmony.

What makes Shillong stand out isn't just its scenery, but its sense of proportion. It's a hill station that hasn't lost its humility. Locals greet strangers with a nod or a smile. Markets sell more flowers than souvenirs. Cafés serve food that

feels homemade. There's no rush to impress, no need for noise.

Visit the traditional markets like Iewduh (Bara Bazaar), and you'll see what authenticity looks like. Khasi women, dressed in their elegant jainsem, sell fresh produce, wild honey, handmade baskets, and spices that carry the scent of the forest. The market is chaotic, yes, but also deeply human — a place where trade still feels personal.

Food in Shillong reflects that same simplicity. You can walk into a small café and find smoked pork with bamboo shoots, jadoh (a Khasi rice and meat dish), or a bowl of tungrymbai that tastes like comfort. The tea here deserves its own chapter — strong, fragrant, and always served with conversation.

Beyond the city's hum lies an entire world of raw, untamed beauty. Drive a few kilometers out, and you'll find yourself surrounded by waterfalls that seem to appear out of nowhere. Elephant Falls, just a short drive from town, is the most famous — a three-tiered cascade that catches the sunlight like silver. But lesser-known ones, like Laitlum Canyons, have a silence that stays with you long after you leave.

Laitlum, which literally means "the end of hills," feels like the edge of the world. Stand there, and you can see deep valleys stretching into infinity, clouds drifting lazily below you, and villages tucked away like secrets. It's the kind of place where silence has a texture, and wind becomes music.

Then there's Mawphlang Sacred Grove — a forest that's not just a place but a philosophy. Protected by the Khasi people for centuries, it's considered sacred, and no leaf or stone is to be taken from it. Step inside,

and you'll understand why. The light barely touches the forest floor, moss covers everything, and the air feels heavy with age. It's not about religion. It's about respect — a living example of how deeply the Khasis value their relationship with nature.

The people of Shillong carry themselves with quiet pride. The Khasi matrilineal system gives women an equal — often leading — role in family and society. You feel it everywhere: in the confidence of shopkeepers, teachers, and musicians who own their space without needing to assert it. The city is also strikingly cosmopolitan. Its schools and colleges have drawn students from across the Northeast and beyond for

melody to the streets. Conversations here flow easily. People are curious without being intrusive, proud without being arrogant.

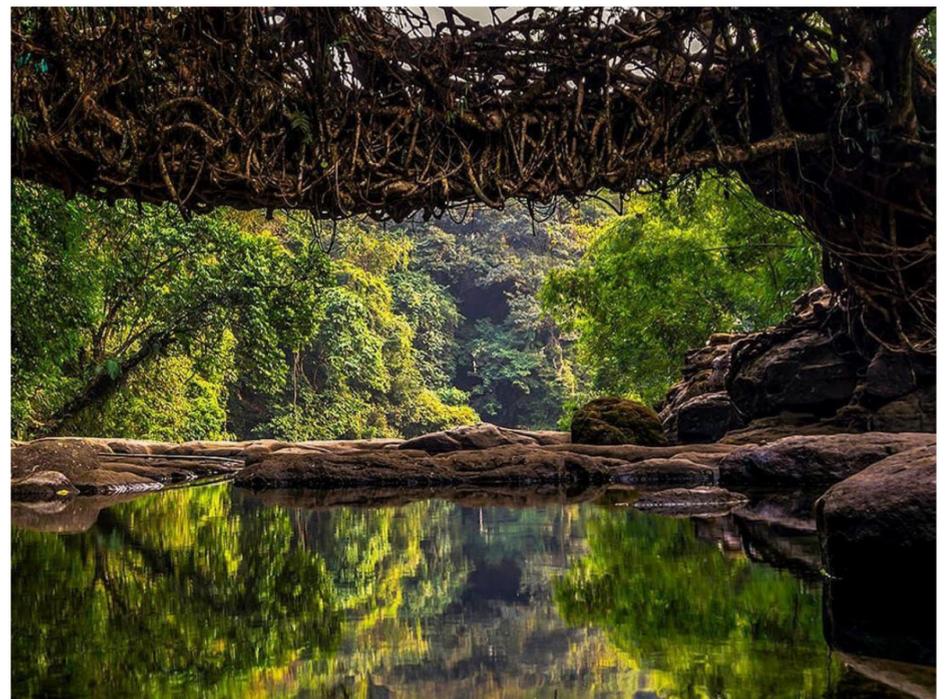
Rain isn't a season in Shillong — it's a personality. It comes and goes as it pleases. Sometimes it falls softly, like a secret being told. Sometimes it arrives in sheets, drumming on rooftops until the whole city listens. Locals have made peace with it. They don't rush for umbrellas or curse the clouds. They just move slower, talk longer, and let the world cool down.

That's perhaps the real charm of Shillong. It teaches you how to pause. How to notice small things — the sound of church bells

ing. Shillong doesn't overwhelm you with grand monuments or famous landmarks. It works quietly — through moments, people, and moods. It's the way locals hum old rock ballads in tea stalls. It's the warmth of a stranger offering directions. It's the sense that life here moves at the right speed.

When you stand at Ward's Lake as the sun sets, or sip tea on a rainy morning watching clouds roll across the hills, you realize something: beauty doesn't always need to be dramatic. Sometimes it just needs to be honest.

Shillong is not a destination — it's a state of mind. It's what happens when nature, music, and humanity find their balance. It's gen-



decades. You'll find Assamese, Nagas, Mizos, Bengalis, and Nepalis all living side by side — a mix that makes the city both vibrant and grounded.

English is widely spoken, but the music of Khasi — soft, rhythmic, and full of vowels — adds its own

echoing across the hills, the glow of streetlights through fog, the laughter of schoolchildren racing home in the rain. Beauty here isn't loud. It's layered, patient, and alive in the details.

Most travelers arrive expecting scenery. They leave remembering a feel-

tle but confident, modern but rooted, small but significant. In a world obsessed with noise and speed, Shillong reminds you that stillness can be just as powerful. The city doesn't ask for attention. It earns it — quietly, beautifully, and completely.



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Adventure Sports
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www.krcfoundation.org



11 JAN
Barak Valley Conclave
 Potential, Issues and Challenges of Barak Valley by different youth organizations.
 Includes: MOCA, and D-governance and reform for rural upland, watershed, water conservation, and preservation programs. Participation through invitation only. Different rewards are provided.



12 JAN
River-Climate Conclave
 Climate change will accelerate on Global Change, pollution and over-exploitation. The Conclave will focus on the importance, technical and practical of River Barak, Planning & Geography, environmental and sustainable River Barak, Climate Change.



JAN'25
Online Global Fest
 All can participate online and send a video clip on Poems, Songs and Drama. Present in Assamese, Bengali, English, Hindi & Manipuri. Last Date: 31st December 2024.



10 JAN
Media Conclave
 Media Conclave: Media Conclave, Workshops, and the Fund, Talks and Conferences are part of the 'Barak Festival 2025'. Theme: 'One for All, All for One'.
 Workshop: Journalism, Photography, Editing & Computer Graphics, Graphics, Print, Booklets, Booklets.



BROADCAST PARTNER



REGISTER HERE

Contact: info@krcfoundation.org
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10-12 JAN
Science Studio
 Real a glimpse of Science to its new heights. Class VI-XI | Teachers | Seniors, Administrators | Parents.
Raw science out of textbooks into real-life experiences of students.

DEC'24-JAN'25
Photography
 Online Photography Contest: River Barak | NE India | Art & Culture of NE | NE Culture.
 Real-Time Photography Contest of 'Barak Festival 2025'.

Barak Festival
Band Night 10 JAN
Musical Night 11 JAN



Contact: info@krcfoundation.org
 WP: 0721300019

10-12 JAN
E-Sports
 Full-Blown Demos | CASH PRIZES | Trophy



11 JAN
film festival
 Award-Giving Ceremony | Film from Member Short Films from Barak Valley, NE India, W & Media Talk | Exhibitions | Meet & Greet



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10-12 JAN
Book Bank
 #NoOneLeftBehind Campaign | Book Bank | Donate | Reuse | Recycle

Book Club
 Meet Authors, Publishers, Read & Discuss, Buy and Sell Books

Painting Carnival
 Water Colour and Oil and Saw, Paper Campaign