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PERSPECTIVE

'Made in China' stickers are made in Korea.

Nine Arrested in Manipur for Allegedly Selling Six-Year-Old Son for Rs.1 Lakh

IMPHAL
Manipur Police have arrested nine individuals, including the parents and alleged intermediaries, for their purported involvement in selling a six-year-old boy for ₹1 lakh in Imphal West district, officials said on Friday. The child, a resident of Khaidem Mayai Leikai, was allegedly sold by his parents to a buyer from Uripok locality in the same district. The boy was safely rescued following coordinated intervention by the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), the Manipur Social Welfare Department, and the police.

According to police officials, the arrests were made over the past 48 hours from multiple locations across Imphal West. The accused include the boy's 33-year-old father, his mother, and several others suspected of facilitating the illegal transaction. The case came to light after the child's aunt, along with local residents, raised an alarm on social media regarding his disappearance. The boy had reportedly been missing from his home for three days in December 2025. Police investigations later revealed that the parents had misled neighbours by claiming the child had been enrolled in a boarding school at Langmeidong in Kakching district. Subsequent inquiries uncovered that the child had instead been handed over to another individual in exchange for money. Acting on the information, authorities traced the boy and secured his rescue. The accused were produced before the Duty Magistrate of Imphal West, who remanded them to police custody until January 5. They have been booked under provisions of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act and relevant sections of laws dealing with child abduction and trafficking.

WHO SAID WHAT



Our eviction drive continues relentlessly! Simultaneously, illegal entrants are being swiftly identified and deported, ensuring safety, security and the rule of law for all.
- Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, CM, Assam

Manipur child rights panel drafts plan for displaced children

IMPHAL

The Manipur Commission for Protection of Child Rights (MCPCR) has presented a Draft State Action Plan aimed at safeguarding and rehabilitating children displaced by the ongoing violence in the state, highlighting the need for urgent, coordinated and child-focused interventions.

The draft was placed before stakeholders at a Convergence and Review Meeting held at the office of the Deputy Commissioner in Bishnupur district. The meeting was chaired by MCPCR Chairperson Keisam Pradipkumar and brought together officials from district administration, child protection agencies and allied departments to assess existing measures and identify gaps in support for Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) children.

Reviewing the situation on the ground, the meeting examined current welfare, protection and rehabilitation initiatives for displaced children and sought detailed inputs



from stakeholders to strengthen a rights-based and long-term response.

Underscoring the seriousness of the crisis, Pradipkumar urged the

Manipur government to announce a State Transitional Support Plan for IDPs who are in the process of resettlement. He also pressed for the ear-

ly notification of the Manipur State Policy for Children, arguing that both steps would significantly improve the state's capacity to respond to the complex and evolving needs of children affected by displacement.

Providing a district-level overview, Additional District Magistrate T. Opendro said that 292 households, comprising 1,027 persons, have so far been resettled in Bishnupur district. He informed that housing assistance is being extended under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), with financial support of Rs 70,000 for partially damaged houses and Rs 3 lakh for fully damaged houses. Out of 1,180 applications received under the scheme, construction has been completed for 40 houses.

District Child Protection Officer Indrani Devi said that 1,862 children have been recommended for assistance under the Mission Vatsalya Sponsorship Scheme. She added that 2,798 displaced children in Bishnupur district have been identified as Children in Need of Care and Protec-

tion, underlining the scale of vulnerability created by the conflict.

Participants, however, raised concerns about the limited reach and rigid framework of Mission Vatsalya when applied to a conflict-driven displacement scenario like Manipur's.

They stressed the need for greater flexibility in policy implementation, sustained monitoring and follow-up, and stronger mental health and psychosocial support services for affected children.

The meeting highlighted the importance of effective convergence among health services, District Child Protection Units, juvenile justice institutions and community-based mechanisms to ensure comprehensive care and protection.

The deliberations concluded with a collective call for a more adaptive, responsive and holistic framework that prioritises the rights, safety and well-being of IDP children across Manipur, particularly as resettlement efforts gather pace.

First-level checking of EVMs, VVPATs begins in Dima Hasao ahead of Assam polls



HAFLONG

The First Level Checking (FLC) of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) units for the 2026 Assam Legislative Assembly elections has begun in Dima Hasao district, election officials said on Friday.

According to the schedule issued by the office of the Chief Electoral Officer, Assam, the FLC is being conducted from January 2 to January 8 at the EVM and VVPAT warehouse near the Additional Court Building in Haflong. The exercise covers the district's lone Assembly constituency, 113-Haflong (ST).

Officials said the checking process is being carried out in the presence of authorised representatives of recognised national and regional political parties in Dima Hasao, in line with Election Commission of

India guidelines to ensure transparency and confidence in the electoral process.

A five-member team of engineers from the Electronics Corporation of India Limited (ECIL) has been deployed to undertake the technical verification of the machines. The FLC is being conducted from 9 am to 7 pm.

Election authorities described the exercise as a critical pre-poll step to assess the functionality, reliability and readiness of EVMs and VVPATs well ahead of polling. The entire process is being supervised by Shaurya Sharma, Additional District Commissioner, Dima Hasao.

District election officials reiterated their commitment to conducting free, fair and transparent elections, stating that all procedures are being strictly followed as per the Election Commission's prescribed norms.

KOHIMA

Nagaland has emerged as the fastest-growing state in Goods and Services Tax (GST) collections, recording a 37 per cent increase up to December in the 2025-26 financial year, according to data released by the Ministry of Finance.

The state's growth far outpaced the national average GST growth rate of 6.8 per cent during the same period, underscoring a significant strengthening of Nagaland's indirect tax base.

Data from the CGST Dimaipur Commissionerate showed that the surge in collections was achieved despite the rollout of GST 2.0 reforms in September 2025, under which tax rates were reduced on more than 375 goods and services. Officials said the sustained growth reflected structural improvements in compliance rather than one-time gains.

Tax authorities attributed Nagaland's strong performance largely to the destination-based nature of the GST regime, which benefits consumer-oriented states with relatively limited industrial activity. As a net-consuming state, Nagaland accrues a higher share of GST revenue at the point of consumption, contributing to improved fiscal stability.

Officials also pointed to sustained efforts in taxpayer edu-



cation and stricter enforcement as key factors behind improved compliance. Increased awareness among traders and service providers, combined with regular outreach programmes, has helped widen the tax base.

The continued digitalisation of GST processes has further supported revenue growth by improving transparency, simplifying return filing, and reducing procedural bottlenecks for businesses, officials said.

Post-settlement figures indi-

cated that Nagaland's GST collections remained robust even after inter-state adjustments, suggesting that the growth was stable and not driven by temporary accounting factors.

Officials at the CGST Dimaipur Commissionerate said maintaining momentum would depend on continued investment in digital services, taxpayer facilitation, and compliance monitoring, particularly as the GST system evolves further in the coming years.

Arunachal writer Subi Taba wins Ramnath Goenka Sahithya Samman for Best Fiction

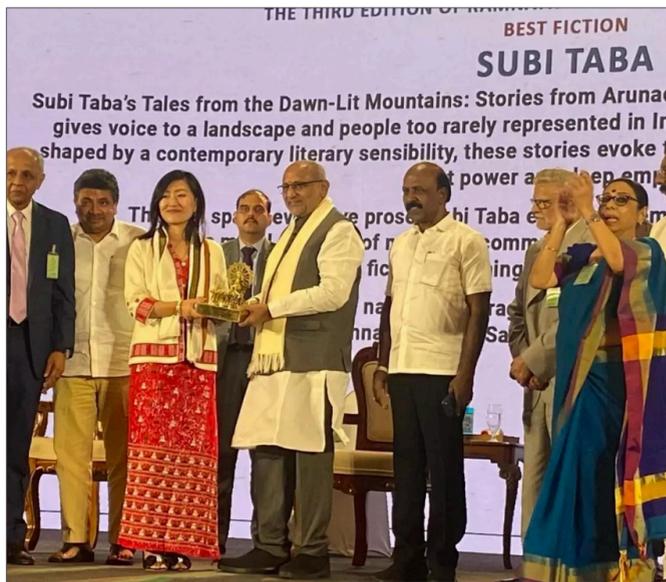
ITANAGAR

Arunachal Pradesh writer Subi Taba has been awarded the Ramnath Goenka Sahithya Samman 2025 for Best Fiction for her acclaimed short story collection Tales from the Dawn-Lit Mountains, marking a significant moment for literature from India's Northeast.

The award, instituted by the New Indian Express Group, was presented at a ceremony in Chennai by Vice President C P Radhakrishnan, in the presence of eminent jury members, writers and cultural figures.

According to the citation, Tales from the Dawn-Lit Mountains: Stories from Arunachal Pradesh was described as "a luminous work of fiction that gives voice to a landscape and people too rarely represented in Indian literature." The jury praised the collection for being deeply rooted in Arunachal's oral traditions while employing a contemporary literary sensibility to evoke the rhythms of everyday life in the hills "with quiet power and deep empathy."

Through spare and evocative



prose, the jury noted, Taba explores themes of memory, belonging, loss and resilience, capturing the moral and emotional universe of mountain communities negotiating the pressures of social and cultural change. The work was said to expand "the imaginative geography of Indian fiction" and reaffirm storytelling as a form of cultural preservation and renewal. Tales from the Dawn-Lit Mountains emerged as the Best Fiction title in a highly competitive year, surpassing other shortlisted works including Heart Lamp by International Booker Prize winner Bhanu Mushtaq and The Girl with the Seven Lives by Vikas Swarup, author of Slumdog Millionaire.

The recognition highlights the growing national visibility of literary voices from the Northeast and underscores Arunachal Pradesh's increasing presence in India's contemporary literary landscape. The Ramnath Goenka Sahithya Samman is regarded as one of the country's most respected literary honours, celebrating narrative integrity, authenticity and artistic excellence.

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2026

INVITATION
You are cordially invited

to the Inaugural and Flag Off Event of the North East Integration Rally 2026 — an initiative celebrating unity, culture, and the vibrant spirit of Northeast India.

DATE January 4, 2026
TIME 9:00-11:30 AM
VENUE Nabadarsha Co-operative Housing Society Ltd, Nilachal, Birati, Kolkata.

RSVP Biswadeep Gupta, CEO
WP: 9330830083

www.northeastintegrationrally.in



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VB-GRAM-G 2025

India has embarked on a new chapter in rural development with the passage of the Viksit Bharat – Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin), 2025 (VB-GRAM-G, 2025), which replaces the two-decade-old Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), 2005. The new law, having received Presidential assent, is scheduled for implementation across the country in FY 2026-27, marking a visionary shift from employment guarantee to a mission-oriented model of comprehensive rural transformation.

As someone closely observing rural governance in Kishtwar district, I view this change as a turning point for our region. Kishtwar – the largest district of Jammu & Kashmir in terms of area, covering 7,824 sq km – is home to 13 CD Blocks, 136 Gram Panchayats (GPs) & 156 Revenue Villages. Its rugged mountains, dispersed settlements and limited connectivity have long posed formidable challenges to infrastructure creation and equitable growth. The launch of VB-GRAM-G offers a real opportunity to bridge these enduring gaps. Under the new framework, rural households will be entitled to 125 person-days of wage employment per financial year, providing a stronger livelihood safety net within their own Gram Panchayat. A notable innovation is the 60-day pause for agricultural activity, allowing rural workers to engage in their farming seasons without losing guaranteed employment benefits. This flexibility reflects a responsive policy design, aligning rural employment with the rhythm of local agrarian cycles—a long-standing demand of our farming communities.

Kishtwar's rural landscape faces a significant infrastructure deficit, with many villages lacking adequate schools, roads and public amenities. The new scheme's design includes wide-ranging infrastructure creation – from additional classrooms and laboratories in rural schools to playgrounds, compound walls and kitchen sheds. There are 712 schools across our rural areas, many housed in old or temporary structures; this scheme could dramatically uplift the education infrastructure and learning environment. Water scarcity is one of Kishtwar's chronic issues. VB-GRAM-G prioritizes water conservation, watershed development, groundwater recharge and rejuvenation of water bodies, interventions critical to sustaining agriculture and livelihoods in our hilly terrain. Afforestation and eco-restoration components promise both climate resilience and ecosystem stability, especially in snow-fed but water-insecure villages.

VB-GRAM-G includes special provisions for disaster-prone districts like Kishtwar, emphasizing works to mitigate extreme weather events such as glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs) and cold waves. These align with the scheme's four thematic domains, integrating Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans with PM Gati Shakti for climate-resilient assets. Beyond wages, the scheme emphasizes productive and livelihood-oriented assets—a welcome step toward self-reliant rural economies. It envisions the construction of training cum-skill development centres, rural haats, storage facilities, cold chains and market infrastructure for agricultural produce. Dedicated provisions for livestock shelters, dairy and fisheries infrastructure and compost units will diversify income sources, empowering Self Help Groups, youth and marginal farmers. These interventions will sow the seeds of entrepreneurship and rural enterprise. Habitations like Marwah, Warwan, Dachhan, Bunjwah, Padder and Kuntwara, which often face geographic isolation and limited access to UT services, will greatly benefit from solar lighting, boarder infrastructure and library development works envisioned under the scheme. Such focused interventions will bring educational, economic and technological inclusion to even the remotest corners of Kishtwar.

A defining hallmark of VB-GRAM-G is its digital governance ecosystem. The scheme integrates biometric authentication, GPS-based work monitoring, real-time MIS dashboards, and AI-powered planning, audits and fraud detection. The use of geospatial tools under PM Gati Shakti, combined with Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans, will enable data-driven, saturation based planning. This will strengthen accountability, transparency and citizen participation at every administrative tier.

Implementation will rest with the Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, with experienced JKAS officers playing a central role. The scheme also envisages recognition and promotion pathways for officers handling complex developmental programmes, which will professionalize service delivery and motivate performance at the grassroots. The VB-GRAM-G, 2025 mission represents more than just a rebranded employment scheme—it is a composite framework for inclusive growth, local empowerment and digital-era governance. For Kishtwar, it holds the promise of reducing developmental disparity, boosting infrastructure creation, generating wage security and nurturing environmental sustainability.

With its emphasis on convergence, technology and local capacity-building, this initiative can lay the foundation for a self-reliant, equitable and vibrant Kishtwar-truly in step with the vision of Viksit Bharat @ 2047.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

“Prejudices. It is well known they are most difficult to eradicate from the heart whose soil has never been loosened or fertilized by education.” - Charlotte Brontë

Indian Diplomacy in 2025: Of National Interests and Global Ambitions



ASAD MIRZA

India's foreign policy in 2025 continued to be anchored in the dual ethos of “Bharat First” and “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam,” balancing national interest with global cooperation. Strategic autonomy, non-alignment, and economic diplomacy remained central pillars of its international engagement. India maintained a multi-aligned posture, strengthening ties across diverse blocs without committing to any single power during the past year. The strategic focus remained on managing relations with the US, China, and Russia, alongside neighbouring countries and major global alliances.

While early 2025 saw optimism with the launch of “Mission 500” to boost bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030 and a new 10-year defence framework, tensions escalated later in the year. The US imposed 50% tariffs on Indian exports, citing India's continued oil trade with Russia. India responded firmly, condemning the move and refusing to compromise on its sovereignty.

Meanwhile, India continued to deepen its defence and counterterrorism collaboration with Russia. A high-profile visit by President Putin to India, signalled further expansion of strategic ties.

India and China reached a border patrol agreement in late 2024, restoring patrol routines in contested areas. By mid-2025, direct flights resumed and tourist visas for Chinese citizens were reissued. Defence ministers from both sides reiterated their commitment to de-escalation and trust-building.

India launched its first Africa-India Key Maritime Engagement (AIKEYME) naval exercise in April 2025, co-hosted with Tanzania and involving ten nations. This initiative boosted maritime cooperation and expanded India's outreach in the Indian Ocean region.

The “Neighbourhood First” policy remained a cornerstone of India's regional diplomacy. In 2024-25, India extended credit lines and aid to countries like Sri Lanka and leveraged platforms like the G20 to reinforce its regional leadership. With Gulf nations, India has strengthened energy and investment ties, including a landmark treaty with the UAE.

Foreign Minister Jaishankar emphasised the importance of an “Aatmanirbharta” mindset, i.e. self-reliance—as a strategic tool to navigate global turbulence and realise the vision of a developed India.

India also adopted a firm stance on cross-border terrorism. Its military operations like Operation Sindoor and the deployment of drones and AI-based fencing reflected a shift toward security-driven diplomacy. This marked a departure from earlier idealistic approaches to a more assertive foreign policy.

India also forayed to deepen ties with countries like Germany and Japan to leverage technological and strategic strengths amid shifting global

dynamics.

For years though, New Delhi has cultivated the image of being a “Vishwaguru” (world teacher), expertly balancing competing global powers while championing the Global South. The guiding doctrine was “strategic autonomy”—the ability to engage with all sides without being beholden to any.

However, 2025 has brutally exposed the limitations of this approach. What was once hailed as diplomatic dexterity is now increasingly viewed by global capitals as transactional aloofness.

The most significant rupture of 2025 has been the rapid cooling of ties with the United States. For years, Washington overlooked New Delhi's democratic backsliding and protectionist economics, betting on India as a counterweight to China. That bet soured under the new geopolitical realities of 2025.

In 2025, the return of Donald Trump to the White House, after a four-year hiatus laid bare the false bonhomie of diplomatic relations. The Trump administration's imposition of hefty tariffs on Indian goods—in retaliation for India's digital services tax and protectionist barriers—hit the Indian economy hard. Unlike previous administrations that prioritised strategic partnership over trade disputes, the current US approach is strictly transactional. The diplomatic fallout is not just economic; it is strategic. Washington's renewed engagement with Pakistan and its criticism of India's continued purchase of Russian energy signal a loss of India's “exceptional” status in American foreign policy.

Perhaps the most glaring evidence of India's strategic cul-de-sac is the continued embrace of Vladimir Putin. The Russian President's visit to India in December 2025 was projected by Indian media as a triumph of independent foreign policy. In reality, it highlighted India's dwindling options.

While the West tightens the economic noose around Moscow, New Delhi's decision to deepen energy and trade ties with Russia is no longer viewed as “neutrality.” It is seen as actively underwriting Russia's war effort in Ukraine. This has alienated India's European partners who were previously willing to cut India some slack. The “bear hug” with Putin does not signal strength; it signals a desperate need for energy security and defence spares, regardless of the reputational cost. It reinforces the narrative that India is a spoiler in the international rules-based order, interested only in short-term gain.

Meanwhile, in 2025 the diplomatic crisis with Canada aggravated into a permanent sore. What began as allegations regarding the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar snowballed into a broader reputational crisis. A lawsuit by a Canadian border officer, alleging he was framed by Indian disinformation, kept the issue in global headlines. New Delhi's dismissive response—characterising these concerns as mere political pandering by Ottawa—failed to convince Western intelligence communities, who see a

pattern of extraterritorial aggression that contradicts India's claims of being a rule-abiding democracy.

Closer to home, the “Neighbourhood First” policy lies in tatters. The collapse of the Sheikh Hasina regime in Bangladesh was a catastrophic intelligence and diplomatic failure for New Delhi. By placing all its chips on a single, increasingly unpopular leader, India alienated the Bangladeshi public.

The interim government in Dhaka, led by Muhammad Yunus, has been treated with a cold shoulder by New Delhi, a move that is widely interpreted as petulance rather than prudence. While Indian media amplifies narratives of minority persecution in Bangladesh, New Delhi has shown little appetite for constructive engagement with the new power centres in Dhaka. This void is being rapidly filled by other players, including Pakistan and China, effectively encircling India with indifferent or hostile neighbours.

The Maldives and Sri Lanka, both remained another lost cause, with Male steadily drifting into Beijing's orbit and Colombo not sticking to the Indian script in spite of India's financial and security assistance to the island nation. The recurring theme across South Asia in 2025 was clear, India is seen not as a benevolent big brother, but as a meddlesome hegemon that cannot tolerate political dissent in its backyard.

As far as trade is concerned, India had already sensed it needed to change strategies in an uncertain world of shifting alignments, as evidenced by its efforts to diversify its economic partnerships in 2025. The signing of the India-United Kingdom Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in July and fast-forwarding the negotiations for the India-European Union (EU) FTA as seen through the December dialogue and an FTA with New Zealand in December, indicate that New Delhi recognised the new fault lines that the Trump administration's tariff measures have exposed.

India's self-anointed role as the “Voice of the Global South” faced a credibility crisis. Rhetoric aside, the reality is that New Delhi's capacity to deliver material benefits to developing nations remain limited as compared to China's deep pockets.

More damaging, however, is the perception of hypocrisy. On critical issues like the crisis in Gaza, India's alignment tilted visibly toward Israel and the West, putting it at odds with the very Arab and African nations it claims to lead. The Global South expected solidarity, not equivocation. By trying to please everyone, India has ended up pleasing no one. Developing nations are realising that when the chips are down, India's “autonomy” often means looking out for itself, leaving vulnerable partners to fend for themselves.

India's current foreign policy moment is defined by the limits of external balancing and realising the need to develop internal strength. Multi-alignment has proven valuable in securing

capital, technology, and diplomatic space, but faltered as a source of reliable support from strategic partners during crises. The downturn in US-India ties illustrate the contradiction of multi-alignment. In such a context, New Delhi is signalling that its future trajectory will be less about picking “trusted partners” and more about ensuring that no partner becomes indispensable.

2025 will be remembered as the year India's diplomatic luck ran out. The transition from “strategic auto-

DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

My heartfelt gratitude to Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri @narendramodi ji for this inspiring initiative to honour our timeless civilisational heritage. The Grand International Exposition of the Sacred Piprahwa Relics beautifully reconnects the world with the spiritual and cultural legacy of Lord Buddha, reflecting a deep respect for India's spiritual roots and our shared heritage. ~ Pema Khandu, CM Arunachal Pradesh



my” to “aloofness” is not just a semantic shift; it represents a fundamental failure to build deep, trust-based alliances. By alienating its neighbours, frustrating its Western partners, and offering little more than words to the Global South, India risks entering 2026 as a lonely power—large, loud, but increasingly ignored.

India will continue to work with the United States, Europe, Japan, Russia, and even China where interests overlap, but on issue-based terms that strengthen its internal capacity. The success of Indian foreign policy will ultimately rest not on alliances or rivalries, but on whether internal balancing can deliver the material foundation for India's great-power aspirations. In an era of shifting alliances and rising tensions, India's diplomatic strategy must be both adaptive and resolute. In addition, its strategic focus on Three Ds – Destroy, Deter and Deny remains debatable in terms of overall outcome. Next year, well thought and focused approach is needed to get the best outcomes. The nation's ability to maintain its sovereignty while engaging with global powers will define its success on the world stage

Karbi Anglong witch-hunting horror: 18 arrested for lynching, burning couple alive

KARBI ANGLONG
Police in Assam's Karbi Anglong district have arrested 18 people in connection with a gruesome witch-hunting incident in which a couple was lynched and burnt alive by a mob, an act that has sparked widespread outrage and renewed concern over superstition-driven violence in the state.

The arrests were confirmed on January 2 by Inspector General of Police (Law and Order) Akhilesh Kumar Singh, who described the killings as an "extremely barbaric crime rooted in blind faith and collective violence." He said the investigation was progressing rapidly and that no one involved in the crime would be spared.

Senior police officials, including IGP Singh and Karbi Anglong Senior Superintendent of Police Pundraj Singh, visited No. 1 Belguri Munda village under Howraghat Police Station to review

the law-and-order situation and oversee the investigation. Security has been strengthened in and around the village to prevent any further unrest.

"We have apprehended 18 suspects so far, and the investigation is continuing to identify all those who participated in or instigated this heinous act," IGP Singh told reporters. "This was a premeditated and inhuman crime. The police will ensure the strictest possible legal action against every perpetrator."

The incident occurred on Friday when a mob attacked Gardi Birua and his wife Mira Birua, residents of No. 1 Belguri Munda village. According to preliminary findings and eyewitness accounts, the couple was accused of practising witchcraft and allegedly causing illness among villagers—claims rooted in superstition and fuelled by the influence of a self-styled local oracle.

Investigators said a woman in the

village, described by locals as a so-called "godwoman," claimed to be possessed by 'Ma Durga' and publicly accused the couple of being responsible for disease and misfortune in the area. Acting on her pronouncements, villagers allegedly mobilised and carried out the attack.

Eyewitness testimonies paint a chilling picture of the violence. Armed with sticks and iron rods, the mob allegedly dragged the couple out, beat them mercilessly and hacked at them before setting them on fire within their residential compound. Witnesses said the victims were still alive when they were thrown into the flames. In one of the most disturbing details emerging from the probe, villagers reported that the couple attempted to crawl out of the fire, crying for water and mercy. They were allegedly pushed back into the blaze by the attackers until they succumbed to their injuries. Police sources said the brutality

of the crime suggested collective participation and prior incitement. Several of those arrested are believed to have played active roles in the assault, while others are suspected of instigating or facilitating the attack. Efforts are underway to identify additional accused who may have fled the area after the incident.

The killings have once again brought the issue of witch-hunting into sharp focus in Assam, particularly in remote and economically marginalised regions. Despite the existence of laws aimed at curbing witch-hunting and related practices, such incidents continue to occur, often triggered by superstition, fear and manipulation by self-proclaimed occult practitioners.

Local observers noted that extreme poverty, lack of access to education and inadequate healthcare often create fertile ground for such beliefs to take hold. In Belguri Munda village, officials said

low literacy levels and social isolation may have made residents more susceptible to the claims of the so-called oracle, even in an era of widespread access to information and technology.

Condemning the incident, senior police officials stressed that superstition-driven violence would be dealt with firmly. "This crime is a blot on society," IGP Singh said. "We cannot allow blind faith to turn into collective murder. Law enforcement agencies are committed to ensuring exemplary punishment so that such acts are not repeated."

Authorities have also emphasised the need for long-term interventions beyond criminal ??????. Officials pointed to the importance of sustained awareness campaigns, community engagement and education to counter superstition and prevent witch-hunting-related violence.

The state government has previously announced measures to tackle

witch-hunting through legal action and public awareness, but activists argue that stronger implementation and grassroots-level engagement are urgently required. Civil society groups have called for psychological counselling for affected communities, stricter monitoring of self-styled godmen and godwomen, and faster judicial processes in such cases.

As the investigation continues, police have appealed to residents to cooperate with authorities and refrain from spreading rumours. "Justice for the victims is our priority," a senior officer said. "We will ensure that those responsible for this horrific crime are held fully accountable under the law."

Further arrests are expected as investigators continue to examine evidence, record statements and trace the chain of instigation behind one of the most shocking witch-hunting incidents reported in Assam in recent years.

Congress to launch third phase of Assam-wide outreach from January 3 ahead of 2026 polls

GUWAHATI

With the Assam Assembly elections drawing closer, the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) will roll out the third phase of its state-wide public outreach programme, Rajgor Podulit Rajgor Congress, from January 3, intensifying its engagement at the village and block levels.

Party leaders said the next leg of the campaign will focus on gathering direct feedback from voters on key issues such as employment, education, healthcare, agriculture, rising prices and overall governance. The inputs collected during the exercise are expected to inform the Congress manifesto for the 2026 Assembly elections. The programme is being coordinated by the manifesto committee headed by senior leader Pradyut Bordoloi.

As part of the third phase, five teams will travel simultaneously across different regions of the state. One team, led by APCC president Gaurav Gogoi, will begin its journey in Tinsukia and proceed through Charaideo, Sivasagar, Jorhat and Golaghat. Other teams will cover Udalguri, Tamulpur, Baksa and Nalbari; South Salmara, Goalpara and Kamrup; Dhubri, Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon; and Morigaon, Nagaon and Hojai.

All five teams are scheduled to regroup in Guwahati on January 10 for a culmination programme. The concluding event will bring together representatives from trade unions, professional bodies, civil society organisations and various sectoral groups for consolidated consultations, party leaders said.

The third phase follows earlier rounds of outreach that began in Dibrugarh and, during the second phase from December 20, covered over 15 districts across Upper Assam, the Barak Valley and the hill districts. According to Congress organisers, the initiative combines grassroots engagement through public meetings and door-to-door interactions with structured consultations involving organised groups.

Swadeshi is the path to national progress: Prof Bhagwati Prasad Sharma, Chairman, UNESCO MGIEP

AGARTALA

A Swadeshi Medical Camp was organised at Tripura University to mark the martyrdom day of Babu Genu, regarded as the first martyr of the Swadeshi movement, reaffirming the relevance of indigenous values in contemporary India. The camp, which featured expert medical teams specialising in Ayurveda and Yoga, witnessed wide participation from students, faculty members, staff and local residents. Addressing the inaugural session on Friday, Prof Bhagwati Prasad Sharma, Chairman of UNESCO MGIEP, strongly appealed to people to cultivate patriotism by respecting the labour of Indian workers and consciously choosing products made in the country. He urged the youth to practise Swadeshi in their daily lives, stating that it would help build a stronger economy and accelerate India's journey towards becoming the world's third-largest economy. Prof Sharma said that pride in being Indian should also reflect in the acceptance and use of domestically manufactured products, along with other measures

aimed at strengthening the spirit of a New Bharat. In his address, Acting Vice-Chancellor of Tripura University Prof Shyamal Das said that India has begun rediscovering the strength of Swadeshi and is progressing rapidly by embracing indigenous systems. Paying tribute to Babu Genu, he said innumerable sacrifices were made to awaken the national spirit of Swadeshi. He added that initiatives such as Swadeshi medicine and the Indian Knowledge System are guiding the nation towards reclaiming its role as Vishwaguru.

University Registrar Prof Deepak Sharma recalled that Babu Genu laid down his life in 1930 while opposing the trade of foreign cloth. He said remembering such sacrifices inspires not only the use of Swadeshi products but also the adoption of a Swadeshi mindset rooted in Indian values. On the occasion, he administered a Swadeshi Pledge to research scholars, students, faculty members, officers and staff, following which the auditorium echoed with slogans of "Bharat Mata Ki Jai" and "Jai Swadeshi."

DIBRUGARH

As political activity intensifies ahead of the 2026 Assam Assembly elections, senior Congress leader and APCC president Gaurav Gogoi on Thursday launched a sharp attack on the state's ruling establishment, portraying the upcoming polls as a public reckoning rather than a conventional contest between parties.

Addressing a joint opposition convention in Dibrugarh, Gogoi said the election was "not a fight between political parties, but a fight of the people of Assam against a particular king." Without naming any individual, he said voters were well aware of whom he was referring to, and accused the ruling dispensation of using money power, muscle power, communal polarisation and repeated violations of the law to retain power.

Gogoi said he was confident that the electorate would respond by uniting against what he described as politics driven by fear and intimidation. "The people of Assam will come together and defeat this



politics of money and fear," he said, adding that the outcome of the state elections would send a message far beyond Assam.

Describing the 2026 polls as a referendum on Assam's identity and self-respect, the Congress leader said the people would not compromise on their culture, traditions, historical legacy and dignity. He argued that a strong democratic

verdict from Assam could resonate nationally and inspire resistance against injustice in other parts of the country as well.

Gogoi also alleged that the present government had created an atmosphere of fear across the state. Journalists, government officials and businesspersons, he claimed, were facing increasing pressure and harassment. "Such a climate of fear

has never existed in Assam before. It was not there during the tenure of previous chief ministers," he said, calling the situation unprecedented in the state's political history.

In remarks that were seen as signalling a shift in opposition strategy, Gogoi hinted at possible changes in alliance politics ahead of the elections. "After this month, the phase of friendship will end, and a new political direction will be decided," he said, suggesting that important decisions on opposition unity and electoral alignment could be taken soon.

The convention was attended by several opposition leaders and drew a large turnout of local residents. Speakers repeatedly stressed the need to safeguard Assam's peace, unity and plural cultural identity in the run-up to the elections.

Concluding his address, Gogoi said the opposition was committed to restoring peace and democratic norms in the state. He vowed to end what he described as the "politics of injustice" and called on the people of Assam to reclaim their voice through the ballot box in 2026.

Tripura govt to decide on winter school closures after reviewing weather forecast: CM Manik Saha

AGARTALA

Amid rising public concern over the prevailing cold weather, Tripura Chief Minister Dr Manik Saha on January 3 said the state government will take a final decision on possible winter school closures only after reviewing a detailed forecast from the Meteorological Department.

The Chief Minister said several people have approached him urging the government to consider shutting schools due to the ongoing cold spell. In response, he has asked the Weather Department to submit an assessment of temperature trends over the coming days, stressing that any decision must be guided by scientific inputs rather than speculation. "A file related to the matter has already reached me, but I have instructed officials to first consult the Meteorological Department.

Once the report is received, we will examine it carefully before taking any decision," Saha told reporters.

Emphasising that education remains a priority, the Chief Minister said the government does not view school closures as a default response. "Ensuring continuity in students' studies is equally important. Closing schools is not our primary objective," he said, adding that the government must balance academic interests with health and safety concerns.

Acknowledging apprehensions that temperatures may fall further in the coming days, Saha said appropriate measures would be announced if weather conditions worsen. He underlined that the safety and well-being of young school-going children would remain central to any decision on winter closures.

The Chief Minister reiterated

that the government would act promptly after receiving the weather assessment, taking a considered call that reflects both prevailing conditions and the needs of students and parents across the state. With a sharp cold wave continuing to affect large parts of Tripura, schools run by the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) will remain closed for 11 days, from January 3 to January 13, 2026, officials said on January 2. An official memorandum issued by the Council's Education Department stated that the decision was taken on the directions of the Chief Executive Member and the Executive Member (Education) to safeguard the health and well-being of students during the prevailing cold conditions.

The order clarified that the

temporary closure will not disrupt academic assessments. Practical examinations for Class X and Class XII scheduled during the period will be conducted as per the existing timetable.

All inspectors of schools under the Council have been instructed to ensure wide circulation and strict implementation of the order. The notification was approved by the competent authority and signed by the Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the Council on January 2. Tripura has been witnessing a marked dip in temperatures over the past few days, with tribal and hilly areas particularly affected. The cold spell has disrupted daily life in several regions, prompting authorities to take precautionary measures to protect vulnerable groups, especially children.

Manipur Taekwondo Team Bags 18 Medals at National Open Championship in Kolkata



IMPHAL

Manipur's young Taekwondo athletes delivered a standout performance at the 11th National Open Taekwondo Championship in Kolkata, clinching 18 medals and underlining the State's growing strength in the sport.

The championship was held on December 29 and 30, 2025, at Mantosh Estate on Canal Circular Road in Kolkata. Representing Manipur under the banner of the All Manipur Taekwondo Association, the contingent featured sub-junior, junior, and cadet players from Laira Fighters Club, Uripok. They competed across Kyorugi sparring and Poomsae events, both individual and group.

In Kyorugi, Manipur athletes dominated multiple weight categories. Thangjam Piyush won gold in the sub-junior under 25 kg division, while Diamond Langlenhambam claimed gold in the sub-junior under 40 kg category. Gold medals were also secured by Lempakpam Vedrajit Singh in sub-junior over 50 kg, Vedagyand Thiyam in cadet over 65 kg, and Yaithengbam Bimolchand Singh in junior under 59

kg. Silheiba Warepam and Lonison Wahengbam added silver medals in their respective sub-junior categories.

The team continued its strong showing in Poomsae. In individual events, gold medals were won by Thangjam Piyush, Silheiba Warem, Diamond Langlenhambam, and Lempakpam Vedrajit Singh, while Lonison Wahengbam earned silver. In group Poomsae, Diamond Langlenhambam, Lonison Wahengbam, and Lempakpam Vedrajit Singh secured gold, with Thangjam Piyush, Silheiba Warem, and Lonison Wahengbam adding silver medals.

The overall medal tally stood at 12 gold and six silver, taking the total to 18.

The medal winners were accorded a warm reception at Imphal International Airport by coaches, family members, well-wishers, and members of the local sports fraternity. Coach Edison Konthoujam praised the athletes' discipline and fighting spirit, crediting their success to consistent training, hard work, and strong family support. He said the team's determination to represent Manipur with pride was evident throughout the championship.

Members of the sports fraternity said such performances not only bring recognition to the State but also strengthen grassroots sports development, expressing hope that the achievement would inspire more young athletes in Manipur to take up Taekwondo seriously.

Cultivate reading habits, not social media addiction: Tripura CM at Agartala Book Fair

AGARTALA

Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha on December 2 urged young people to turn away from excessive social media use and rediscover the habit of reading books, describing sustained reading as essential for intellectual growth and social development.

Inaugurating the Agartala Book Fair at the Badharghat International Fairground, Saha expressed concern over what he termed a growing dependence on social media among the youth. He appealed to students and young readers to make books a part of their daily routine and called upon parents and guardians to nurture this habit from an early age.

"Reading books is irreplaceable when it comes to gaining knowledge," the Chief Minister said. "The youth should develop a daily reading habit instead of spending a substantial amount of time on social media. Guardians have a crucial role in motivating children to read and guiding them toward meaningful learning."

Emphasising the cultural value of books, Saha also encouraged the revival of the traditional practice of gifting books on social and family occasions, recalling that it was once a common custom in Tripura.



Such practices, he said, help foster curiosity, discipline and critical thinking among children.

The Agartala Book Fair this year features 183 stalls and has adopted 'Vande Mataram' as its central theme. Referring to the theme, Saha noted that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had earlier appealed for programmes to mark the 150th anniversary

of Vande Mataram, and he praised the organisers for choosing a song of national significance that reflects India's cultural and historical legacy.

The Chief Minister also pointed out that although publishers from various parts of the country are participating in the fair, publishers and booksellers from Bangladesh are absent this year due to the prevail-

ing situation across the border.

The book fair is expected to attract large crowds over the coming days, offering readers access to a wide range of titles across genres. Organisers said the event aims not only to promote books and publishing but also to reinforce a culture of reading at a time when digital distractions increasingly dominate daily life.

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Congress announces three-phase "MNREGA Bachao Sangram" nationwide campaign from Jan 8



NEW DELHI

The Congress on Saturday announced a nationwide three-phase agitation titled "MGNREGA Bachao", after the Centre's newly enacted Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-GRAM G) Act.

Addressing a press conference at the party's office in New Delhi, Congress General Secretaries KC Venugopal and Jairam Ramesh accused the Centre of attempting to centralise the employment guarantee scheme and acting arbitrarily.

Venugopal said the CWC had finalised the future strategy on MGNREGA and approved a structured campaign titled "MGNREGA Bachao Sangram."

"Phase 1 will begin on January 8 with a full-day preparatory meeting at Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) offices in the presence of general secretaries and in-charges. District-level press conference will be held at District Congress Committee (DCC) offices on January 10, followed by a one-day fast at district headquarters on January 11 near the statues of Mahatma

Gandhi and BR Ambedkar," he said.

As per the party, phase 2 of the campaign will run from January 12 to January 30. During this period, panchayat-level chaupals will be organised across all gram panchayats, along with the delivery of a letter from the Congress president.

"Vidhan Sabha-level nukkad sabhas and pamphlet distribution are also planned. On January 30, Martyr's Day, the party will hold peaceful sit-ins at the ward level with MGNREGA workers," Venugopal said.

"Phase 3 will begin on January 31 with district-level MNREGA Bachao dharmas at DC/DM offices till February 6. This will be followed by state-level gheraos of Vidha Sabha buildings from February 7 to February 15 and four zonal AICC rallies across the country between February 16 and February 25," he added.

Jairam Ramesh said the campaign would launch on January 8, alleging that the government was moving to centralise MGNREGA.

"The government is acting arbitrarily, we will challenge

the newly created MNREGA in court," he said, adding that this agitation will be a struggle to save MGNREGA.

Venugopal said, "Although this is a Congress program, we will also talk to the opposition and if they want, they can join, but Congress will expose the government on this issue."

Jairam Ramesh said, "We will also talk to the opposition parties. During the session, opposition parties in the House had opposed the new MNREGA law. There are governments of different opposition parties in different states. We will talk and try to include everyone."

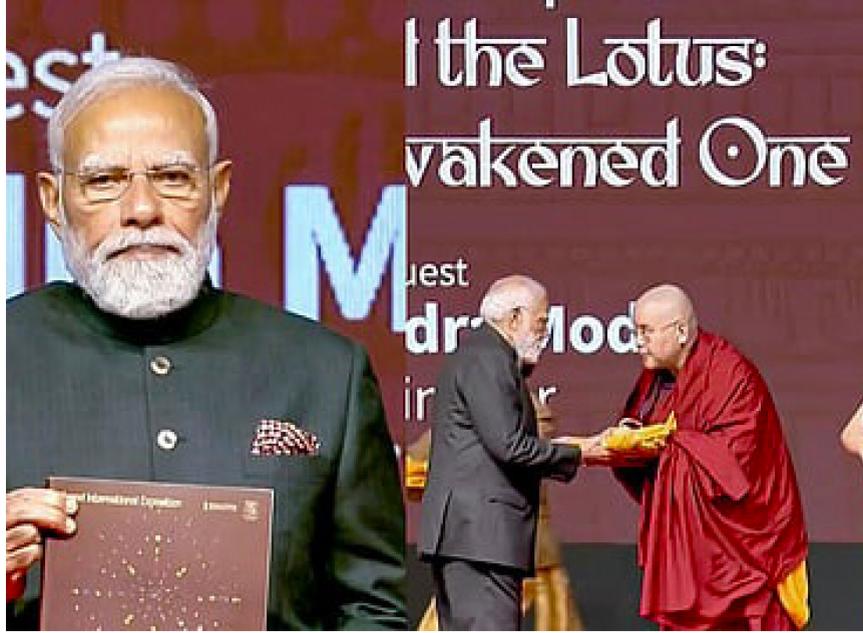
Addressing the media, Venugopal said that removing the name of Mahatma Gandhi is also a "most condemnable act."

"Mahatma Gandhi is not merely a symbol. His name does not stand for symbolism alone. Gandhi ji represented the dignity of labour, village self-rule, and the moral responsibility of the State. Erasing his name reflects an attempt to erase the rights-based vision behind MGNREGA itself," the Congress leader said.

Further, he emphasised that through MGNREGA, the Congress aim to defend the right to work, protect Panchayati Raj institutions, stand with women workers, Dalits, Adivasis, and the rural poor and take this issue to every village in the country.

"Withdraw the VB GRAM G Act and restore the MGNREGA Act in its original, rights-based form, restoring the people's right to work and the authority of Panchayats," Venugopal demanded.

After 127 years abroad, Piprahwa Buddha relic gems return to public view in Delhi



NEW DELHI

Sacred ancient gems linked to the Buddha were unveiled on Saturday in Delhi for the first time since their colonial-era removal.

The Piprahwa gems, a collection of more than 300 precious stones and ornaments believed to have been buried with relics of the Buddha at a stupa site in northern India, were formally displayed at an exhibition in New Delhi.

"This historic event marks the reunification of the Piprahwa gem relics of Lord Buddha, repatriated after 127 years," the Ministry of Culture said in a statement.

It said that they are on display "for the first time" since British excava-

tions in 1898 unearthed them and they were subsequently scattered across the world.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who opened the exhibition, said it was a "very special day for those passionate about history, culture and the ideals" of the Buddha.

The Buddha - who renounced material wealth to embrace and preach a life of non-attachment - founded a religion that now has more than 500 million adherents.

Born in what is now Nepal, he spent much of his life in northern India.

"For India, the sacred relics of Bhagwan Buddha are not merely artefacts, they are a part of our revered heritage and an inseparable part of

our civilisation," the prime minister said at the event here in the presence of Buddhist scholars, diplomats and other guests.

After a wait of one and a quarter centuries, he said, India's heritage has returned, and India's sacred legacy has come back home.

The wisdom and path shown by Bhagwan Buddha belong to all of humanity, he said.

Modi also thanked the Godrej Group for ensuring that the relics of Buddha return to his homeland.

The gems, believed to date back to around 200 BC, were unearthed in 1898 by British colonial engineer William Claxton Peppe in Piprahwa, in Uttar Pradesh state.

Indian authorities said an inscrip-

tion on one of the caskets unearthed with the treasure confirmed the contents - which include bone fragments - as "relics of the Buddha".

While the majority were handed over to colonial authorities and some were housed in the Indian Museum in Kolkata, Peppe kept a treasure trove of jewels.

In May 2025, Peppe's great-grandson, Chris Peppe, put the gems up for sale.

They were listed for auction by Sotheby's in Hong Kong, with a starting bid of \$1.2 million, with experts suggesting they could have made ten times that.

But the auction was cancelled after the Indian Ministry of Culture issued a legal order calling the jewels the "inalienable religious and cultural heritage of India and the global Buddhist community".

The gems were then bought by an Indian conglomerate, Godrej Industries Group, in partnership with India's government. The sale price was not disclosed.

"The Piprahwa gems are not just artefacts," company vice-chairman Purojsha Godrej, said in a statement at the time.

"They are timeless symbols of peace, compassion, and the shared heritage of humanity."

Chris Peppe has said his family was happy that the "gems will be available for the public" to see.

The exhibition in New Delhi brings together the recently returned jewels, other treasures stored in Kolkata and relics from later excavations in the 1970s. Hindu-nationalist leader Modi has in the past loaned parts of the Piprahwa collection for brief exhibitions to places with major Buddhist populations, including Russia's Kalmykia region and neighbouring Bhutan. India's Ministry of Culture said the return of the gems was part of Modi's "broader mission to reclaim and celebrate Bharat's (India's) ancient cultural and spiritual heritage from across the world".

INTERNATIONAL

State of emergency declared in Venezuela after US conducts military strikes over capital

CARACAS

Venezuela accused the United States of an "extremely serious military aggression" after explosions rocked the capital Caracas in the early hours of Saturday following a months-long pressure campaign by President Donald Trump.

The White House and Pentagon have not commented on the explosions and reports of aircraft over the city. US media outlets CBS News and Fox News reported that unnamed Trump administration officials confirming that US forces were involved.

At least seven explosions and low-flying aircraft were heard around 2 am, local time Saturday in the capital, Caracas. Venezuela's government accused the United States of attacking civilian and military installations in multiple states.

"Venezuela rejects, repudiates, and denounces before the international community the extremely serious military aggression perpetrated by the current government of the United States of America against Venezuelan territory and people," the government of leftist President Nicolas Maduro said.

The Venezuelan leader also declared a state of emergency.

The president of neighboring Colombia called for an emergency meeting of the United Nations over the strikes.

"Alerting the whole world that they have attacked Venezuela," leftist leader Gustavo Petro wrote on social media platform X.

Confusion reigned in Caracas as the strikes began. People rushed to their windows and terraces in the middle of the night to try to make sense of events.

"From here, we can hear explosions near Fort Tiuna," said Emmanuel Parabavis, referring to a large military base in the capital.

"Right now, you can hear something that sounds like a machine gun. There are a lot of detonations and gun-



fire," Parabavis, 29, a public relations employee in the El Valle district, told.

Power has been cut in certain parts of the city, according to residents.

Smoke could be seen rising from the hangar of a military base in Caracas. Another military installation in the capital was without power.

People in various neighborhoods rushed to the streets. Some could be seen in the distance from various areas of Caracas.

"The whole ground shook. This is horrible. We heard explosions and planes," said Carmen Hidalgo, a 21-year-old office worker, her voice trembling.

She was walking briskly with two relatives, returning from a birthday party. "We felt like the air was hitting us."

Pentagon referred requests for comment to the White House, which didn't immediately return an email seeking comment. Meanwhile, the Federal Aviation Authority has banned US commercial flights in Venezuelan airspace over "ongoing military activity" ahead of explosions in Caracas.

The FAA's warning, known as "Notice to Airmen," came shortly after one in the morning on the east coast of the U.S. It warned all commercial and private U.S. pilots that the airspace

over Venezuela and the small island nation of Curacao, just off the coast of the country to the north, was off-limits "due to safety-of-flight risks associated with ongoing military activity."

The warnings are designed to alert pilots to a variety of dangers.

Venezuela's government, in the statement, called on its supporters to take to the streets.

"People to the streets!" the statement said. "The Bolivarian Government calls on all social and political forces in the country to activate mobilization plans and repudiate this imperialist attack."

The statement added that President Nicolas Maduro had "ordered all national defence plans to be implemented" and declared "a state of external disturbance". That state of emergency gives him the power to suspend people's rights and expand the role of the armed forces.

The U.S. military, in recent days, has been targeting alleged drug-smuggling boats. On Friday, Venezuela said it was open to negotiating an agreement with the U.S. to combat drug trafficking.

Maduro also said in a pre-taped interview aired Thursday that the U.S. wants to force a government change in Venezuela and gain access to its vast

FBI foils 'ISIS-inspired' New Year's Eve terror plot in North Carolina, 18-year-old held



WASHINGTON

The FBI, on Friday, said that it had disrupted a plot to attack a North Carolina grocery store and fast-food restaurant on New Year's Eve, arresting a man who officials said was inspired by the Islamic State group and had pledged loyalty to the extremist militants.

Eighteen-year-old Christian Sturdivant, who is reported to have a history of mental health issues, was arrested on New Year's Eve for allegedly planning a knife-and-hammer attack in the name of the Islamic State armed group, according to US authorities.

Sturdivant, who was charged with attempting to provide material support to a foreign terror organisation after officials say he communicated his attack plans to an undercover FBI employee who was posing as an encouraging confidant.

He was arrested by federal agents on Wednesday after which a North Carolina judge ordered Sturdivant to remain in custody until a further hearing on January 7.

An FBI affidavit filed in the case said Sturdivant came under investigation last month following information that a social media account, which officials connected to Sturdivant, had made posts supportive of IS.

Those included posts that depicted a ballistic vest and appeared to promote violence, the affidavit said, and the display

name for the account referenced the name of the late IS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Sturdivant began communicating on social media with someone who he thought was supportive of his plans but who was actually an undercover FBI employee, the affidavit said.

"He pledged his allegiance to ISIS with that undercover agent, and he disclosed his plans to 'do jihad' soon," said federal prosecutor Russ Ferguson at a press conference, using another name for the group.

He revealed to the second agent his plans to carry out a knife-and-hammer attack at a grocery store and fast-food restaurant in the town of Mint Hill on New Year's Eve, Ferguson said.

"He said he was going to wear a Kevlar vest and attack people with knives and hammers. And of course, he talked about when he was going to carry out this attack, which was New Year's Eve."

Ferguson declined to name the grocery store and fast-food restaurant that were allegedly targeted, citing the ongoing investigation. But he said both were in Mint Hill, a small bedroom community of Charlotte.

Ferguson stressed that the suspect was put under 24-hour surveillance when it became clear he was planning an attack, and that "at no point was the public in harm's way."

The affidavit said that Sturdivant had been on the FBI's radar in January 2022, when

he was a minor, after officials learned that he had been in contact with an IS member in Europe and had received instructions to dress in all black, knock on people's doors and commit attacks with a hammer.

Sturdivant did actually set out for a neighbor's house armed with a hammer and a knife but was restrained by his grandfather, the affidavit said.

"But no charges were brought at the time and he received psychological care before police authorities were again alerted to his online activities," said Special Agent James Barnacle. The North Carolina attack would've come a year after 14 people were killed in New Orleans by a US citizen and Army veteran who had proclaimed his support for IS on social media.

Other IS-inspired attacks over the past decade include a 2015 shooting rampage by a husband-and-wife team who killed 14 people in San Bernardino, California, and a 2016 massacre at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, by a gunman who fatally shot 49 people. The FBI has foiled several alleged attacks through sting operations in which agents posed as terror supporters, supplying advice and equipment. Critics say the strategy can amount to entrapment of mentally vulnerable people who wouldn't have the wherewithal to act alone.

Tracker Poll projects NDA sweep in Assam 2026; BJP tipped for third straight term with 69-74 seats



The Bharatiya Janata Party is poised to retain power in Assam for a third consecutive term, with the National Democratic Alliance projected to secure a commanding majority in the 2026 Assembly elections, according to the latest Tracker Poll conducted by the People's Pulse Research Organization.

The survey, carried out between November 15 and December 31, 2025, across all five divisions and 35 districts of the state, suggests that the BJP will emerge as the single largest party with an estimated 69 to 74 seats in the 126-member Assembly, comfortably crossing the majority mark on its own. When combined with its alliance partners, the NDA's total tally is projected to approach the 90-seat mark.

According to the poll projections, the Indian National Congress is expected to win between 25 and 29 seats, remaining the principal opposition but falling well short of posing a serious challenge to the ruling coalition.



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Among NDA allies, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) is projected to secure 8 to 11 seats, while the Bodoland People's

Front (BPF) is expected to win between 8 and 10 seats, consolidating the alliance's hold in key regions.

Smaller parties are forecast to register marginal or negligible performances. The All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) is projected at 0 to 2 seats, the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) at 0 to 2, Rajiv Dal at 1 to 2, Assam Jatiya Parishad at 0 to 1, CPI(M) at 0 to 1, and independents and others collectively at 0 to 1 seat.

Vote share advantage
The poll indicates that the NDA's dominance is underpinned by a clear vote share advantage. The BJP is projected to secure around 39 per cent of the vote, maintaining a narrow but decisive lead over the Congress, which is estimated at 37 per cent. While the gap in vote share appears slim, analysts noted that the BJP's organisational reach and more efficient vote distribution have translated into a far larger seat advantage.

Alliance partners AGP and BPF are projected to secure 7 per cent and 5.5 per cent of the vote respectively. Other parties trail significantly, with AIUDF at 2.5 per cent, UPPL at 1.2 per cent, Rajiv Dal at 0.9 per cent, CPI(M) at 0.8 per cent, Assam Jatiya Parishad at 0.7 per cent, and others collectively accounting for around 5 per cent.

The survey attributes the Congress's marginal improvement in vote share largely to the erosion of AIUDF's Muslim support base, par-

ticularly in Barak Valley and parts of Lower Assam. However, the transfer of votes has not been sufficient to significantly alter the overall balance of power.

Regional outlook
Region-wise projections show the NDA maintaining a strong and expansive footprint across the state. In Upper Assam, the alliance is expected to dominate with minimal resistance from the opposition, reflecting the BJP's sustained organisational strength and consolidation among tea garden communities, OBC groups and sections of the urban middle class.

In Middle Assam, the poll forecasts a near-sweep for the BJP-BPF alliance in the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD), reinforcing the NDA's hold in the region. Lower Assam, traditionally a competitive and demographically complex zone, is projected to tilt in favour of the NDA following the 2023 delimitation exercise. The survey notes that the BJP-AGP combine has gained ground amid a reduced concentration of Muslim voters in several re-configured constituencies.

In Barak Valley, the NDA is projected to secure between 8 and 10 seats in the post-delimitation scenario, signalling a consolidation of support among Bengali Hindu voters and sections of the electorate responsive to welfare delivery and infrastructure development.

Governance and leadership per-

ception

The Tracker Poll also assessed public sentiment on governance, development and leadership. On the question of which party is better suited to ensure Assam's development, 48 per cent of respondents favoured the BJP, compared to 38 per cent who preferred the Congress. On government formation, 55 per cent predicted a BJP-led government, against 40 per cent who anticipated a Congress victory.

A similar 55 per cent of respondents said the BJP deserved another term in office, while 45 per cent expressed opposition to its continuation. Analysts said these figures indicate a relatively consolidated pro-incumbency sentiment, reinforced by welfare schemes and perceptions of administrative efficiency.

In the Chief Ministerial preference poll, incumbent Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma emerged marginally ahead with 30 per cent support. He was closely followed by former Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal at 28 per cent, while Congress MP and Assam Pradesh Congress Committee president Gaurav Gogoi secured 27 per cent support.

The findings suggest that while Gogoi enjoys notable personal appeal, particularly among younger voters and sections of the urban electorate, this has not translated into commensurate support for the Congress as a party. Sarma's lead, the survey notes, is strengthened by strong backing from women voters, including among tribal communities. Other leaders - including Debabrata Saikia, Hagrama Mohilary, Atul Bora, Dilip Saikia, Badruddin Ajmal and Akhil Gogoi - registered single-digit support, while around 7 per cent of respondents remained undecided or expressed preference for other options.

Demographics and political trends
According to the survey analysis, Assam's complex demographic composition continues to play a decisive role in shaping electoral outcomes. Hindu Bengali voters and OBC communities are projected to show strong support for the BJP, while Muslim voters are increasingly drifting away from AIUDF towards the Congress.

The poll highlights that AIUDF's decline has been exacerbated by perceptions surrounding its leadership, political positioning and alliances, leaving the party increasingly isolated. Smaller outfits such as Rajiv Dal and Assam Jatiya Parishad are seen as having limited influence, largely confined to specific pockets without statewide traction.

The report also underscores the impact of the 2023 delimitation exercise, welfare-driven beneficiary politics and the BJP's organisational depth in consolidating its base. The NDA's sustained electoral successes since 2021 - including panchayat and municipal polls, by-elections and the 2024 Lok Sabha elections - are cited as reinforcing voter confidence in the ruling alliance.

Analysts associated with the study noted that the BJP has not only retained its core support base but has also expanded into new social groups, particularly among tribal and OBC communities, through a combination of targeted welfare delivery, grassroots mobilisation and leadership visibility.

Methodology
The Tracker Poll was conducted through extensive fieldwork involving face-to-face interviews with over 5,000 respondents across Assam. A structured questionnaire was used to ensure representation across caste, religion, age and gender. In addition to quantitative data, the research team conducted qualitative interviews and consultations with local observers, journalists and political analysts to contextualise the findings.

This is the first Tracker Poll ahead of the 2026 Assembly elections. A second round is planned for February or March 2026, following the formal announcement of the election schedule, to assess shifts in voter sentiment as campaign activity intensifies.

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The Cherrapunji and Mawlynnong



Cherrapunji sits at the edge of the Khasi Hills like a place carved out of cloud and stone. People know it through trivia. Wettest place on earth. Endless rain. Waterfalls everywhere. But the village and its surrounding cliffs hold a deeper story, one shaped by geology, tribal memory, and a relationship with weather that goes beyond climate and enters the realm of belief.

The first thing you feel in Cherrapunji is the air. It wraps around you with a cool heaviness even when the sun looks harmless. The terrain lies open and rugged, with rolling plateaus that plunge suddenly into gorges so deep they feel like the earth split on purpose. There's nothing tame about the geography. You stand at the viewpoint above Nohkalikai Falls and the land stretches out like a map you can almost read. A green expanse, thin villages, sudden cliffs, endless sky.

This is a place where weather doesn't just pass through. It lives.

For most of the world, rain is inconvenient or romantic. In Cherrapunji, it's architecture. It's work. It's a memory. The rainfall is not a poetic drizzle. It's relentless, weeks-long, soaking you until the idea of being dry feels fictional.

What this really means is the rain has shaped everything. Homes once had thatched roofs designed to let water flow without pooling. Paths were built to channel the downpour. Families scheduled farming around the monsoon's moods. In a landscape constantly sculpted by rain, people adapted with patience rather than resistance.

And then there are the clouds. They appear without warning. One moment you see a valley stretching forever. The next you're inside a white room that erases every direction. Cherrapunji teaches you to trust your feet more than your eyes.



If you want to understand Cherrapunji's creativity, stand on a living root bridge and let the place speak for itself. The War-Khasis didn't build these bridges in a single season. They grew them by guiding the roots of rubber fig trees across streams and ravines, weaving them, training them, letting time do what concrete never could.

The bridges are not heritage pieces polished for visitors. They're practical, durable solutions built by people who understand their environment at a molecular level. Some bridges take eighteen to twenty years to become strong enough for daily use. Think about the mindset that requires. A community invests in a structure that their grandchildren will benefit from.

That's a different way of relating to time. It tells you why Cherrapunji feels both ancient and forward-looking at once.

The Khasi worldview runs through Cherrapunji's daily life. Matrilineal descent defines inheritance and lineage. Family ties run through the mother's clan. This shapes household relationships, village leadership patterns, and social responsibility.

Yet, the region doesn't exist in a glass case. Christianity has become a major force here, blending with local traditions. Schools, churches, and small businesses now sit alongside monoliths and sacred groves. The balance isn't perfect, but it's stable.

You sense this mix most clearly in conversations

share resources yet spaced out enough to give every family its own view of the valley. Life here moves at a steady, unhurried rhythm. People respect privacy. They trust silence. They understand the seasons in ways a weather app never could.

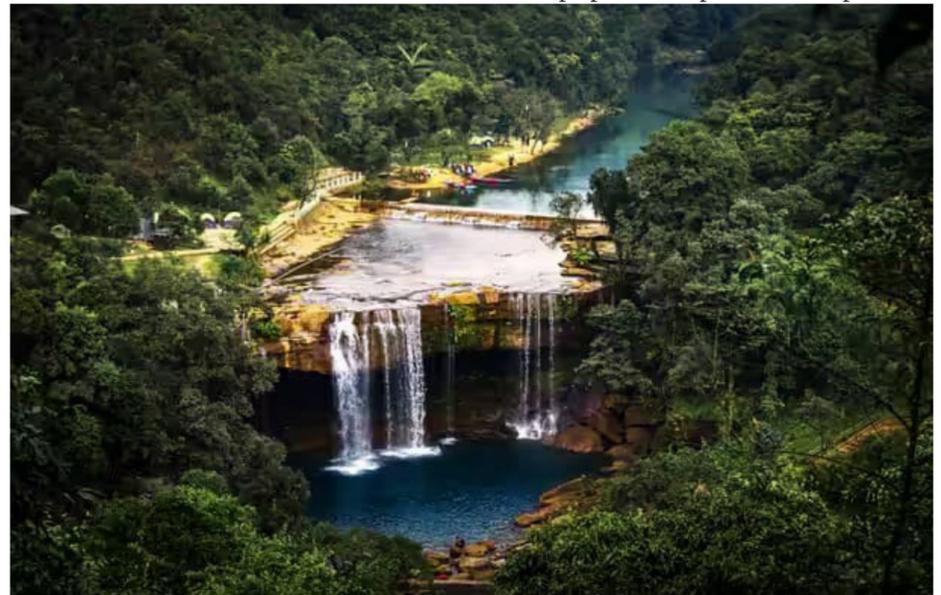
Nohkalikai steals most of the attention, and rightly so. Its drop is dramatic, and the legend behind its name is darker than most tourist spots would dare to advertise. But the region is full of waterfalls that feel more personal: Dainthlen, Seven Sisters, Wei Sawdong, countless unnamed cascades that appear only during the stronger months of rain.

These falls aren't spectacles. They're signatures of a land shaped by gravity and moisture in constant negotiation. The roads have improved. Homestays have doubled. Social media has turned the landscape into a spectacle. But Cherrapunji hasn't morphed into a performance. It still resists becoming a theme park. Even the busiest spots carry a certain restraint. Local guides speak softly. Villagers observe visitors with curiosity rather than commercial urgency.

The tourism economy helps families and builds opportunities, but the community protects its boundaries. Sacred forests remain off-limits. Ritual spaces stay unadorned. Certain stories are shared; others stay rooted in clan memory.

Cherrapunji isn't defined by rainfall records. Those numbers flatten the place into trivia. What defines it is the way its people have built a life around the meeting point of stone, cloud, root, and rain. The region shows how human adaptation can be elegant instead of extractive. How tradition can be innovation. How weather can be a teacher instead of an obstacle. It reminds you that identity formed in harsh landscapes often carries the deepest wisdom.

You come to Cherrapunji expecting climate. You leave thinking about time. The bridges that grow, the cliffs that shift, the villages that endure, and the people who shape a home in a place that



with local residents. They speak of rainfall records, land rights, education, tourism, and climate change with the clarity of people who know their environment intimately and also see how the outside world interprets it.

And that gap—between lived experience and simplistic understanding—defines much of Cherrapunji's quiet frustration.

Move away from the viewpoints and you'll find a quieter Cherrapunji. Children walking to school in neat uniforms. Elderly women carrying baskets woven with the precision of muscle memory. Houses painted in soft pastels that look surprisingly modern against the rugged landscape.

Each settlement sits on a hill crest, close enough to

constantly changes its face. If you want to understand the Northeast's relationship with land, this is where you start.

It adds a little, Mawlynnong is a small village in Meghalaya's East Khasi Hills, known for its reputation as Asia's cleanest village. Travelers come for its spotless lanes, thick greenery, and the remarkable Living Root Bridges crafted by the Khasi community.

The village leans into ecotourism, asking both locals and visitors to help preserve its calm, well-kept environment. Bamboo bins are placed throughout, community cleanups are routine, and plastic is off-limits.



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