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PERSPECTIVE

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Two Kirtan Devotees Killed, 17 Injured as Dumper Collides with Passenger Vehicle on NH-6 in Sribhumi

STRIBHUMI

Two people lost their lives and 17 others sustained injuries when a speeding dumper ramed into a passenger vehicle at Srigouri on National Highway-6 in Sribhumi district on Saturday.

The deceased have been identified as Nirad Das and Tapan Biswas, both of whom died at the scene. Two of the injured are reported to be in critical condition.

According to locals, the dumper (TR-05-H-1738) approached from the wrong side and struck the passenger vehicle (AS-10-C-6667), causing it to overturn into a roadside ditch. The dumper driver initially fled the scene but later surrendered at Badarpur Police Station.

The critically injured were rushed to Silchar Medical College and Hospital, while others received treatment at Srigouri Hospital, coordinated by the Badarpur police.

The injured include Rina Malakar (37), Sajal Malakar (28), Ranjita Malakar (30), Pradeep Roy (7), Birendranath Talukdar (55), Randir Das (50), Pranab Roy (30), Manisha Roy (45), Chandan Dey (44), Krishna Sutradhar (36), Supran Das (44), Lipika Das (51), Sumati Biswas (30), Atialy Das Roy (30), Pradeep Roy (12), Pom Pom Roy (42), and Manisha Biswas (11).

All passengers were members of a kirtan group travelling to Bajraghat in Sribhumi to attend a Naam Kirtan event. Both vehicles have been seized and taken to the police station as part of the ongoing investigation.

WHO SAID WHAT

India-EU signed the 'Mother of all trade deals'...and the world can't keep calm! ~ BJP

Economies.

If Gandhi were alive, he would stand with Assam: Sarma invokes Babu amid Miya remarks backlash

GUWAHATI

Amid an escalating political and ideological row over his remarks on "Miya Muslims", Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday invoked Mahatma Gandhi to defend his government's stance against illegal immigration, asserting that protecting the State's identity and constitutional rights cannot be equated with communal hatred.

Responding to criticism from Mahatma Gandhi's great-grandson, Tushar Gandhi, Sarma said that if Gandhi were alive today, he would have stood with the Assamese people in their struggle against what he described as illegal infiltration. The Chief Minister argued that history bears testimony to Gandhi's role in safeguarding Assam's territorial integrity during the Partition era.

"If Babu was alive today, he would have stood with the Assamese people. History shows that his intervention saved Assam from becoming part of Pakistan. Standing up against illegal infiltration is not hatred - it is about protecting the rights, identity and future of the Assamese people," Sarma said in a post on X.

Rejecting Tushar Gandhi's assertion



that he would have been removed from office in "Babu's India", Sarma said democratic governments are changed only through elections and not by intimidation or attempts to undermine a constitutionally elected authority.

"Let me answer you very clearly: governments in a democracy are changed by the people through elections, not by threats or attempts to pull down an elected Chief Minister," he said.

Tushar Gandhi had earlier criticised Sarma's comments on "Miya Muslims", terming them contrary to Mahatma Gandhi's ideals. He also accused Prime

Minister Narendra Modi of fostering divisive politics.

The exchange comes amid mounting criticism of Sarma's recent remarks, in which he used the term "Miya" while referring to alleged illegal immigration from Bangladesh. The comments have triggered sharp reactions from opposition parties and civil society groups, who have accused the Chief Minister of stigmatising a community.

Defending his position, Sarma cited Supreme Court observations to argue that concerns over demographic change in Assam are neither imagined nor po-

Jiribam massacre: NIA court takes cognisance of charges against three accused

IMPHAL

The Special Court of the National Investigation Agency (NIA), Manipur No. 1, on January 29 took cognisance of the charge sheet filed against three accused in connection with the abduction and brutal killing of six persons—three women and three children, including an eight-month-old infant—in Manipur's Jiribam district.

The accused have been identified as Thanglienal Hmar alias Boya (40) and Lalrosang Hmar alias Rosang (24), both residents of Moinathol village in Dikhosh Grant area of Assam's Cachar district, and Khopuimoi Hmar alias Puia (33) of Keisel Punji, Borobekra, Jiribam. All three are currently lodged at the Temporary Jail in Jiribam and were produced before the court through video conferencing.

After hearing submissions from the NIA's Special Public Prosecutor and defence counsel, and perusing the materials on record, the court took cog-



nisation of the charge sheet under various provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), the Arms Act and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). The NIA had submitted the charge sheet along with the requisite prosecution sanction under the UAPA on January 23, 2026.

The court directed the investigating agency to supply copies of relevant charge sheet documents to the accused on or before February 10, 2026.

The case pertains to the abduction of six members of the Meitei community from Jakuradhor Karong in Jiribam district on November 11, 2024. The victims—Yurembam Rani Devi (60), Telem Thoibi Devi (31), Laishram Heitonbi

(25), Telem Thajamanbi (8), Laishram Chingkhingnaba (2) and Laishram Langamba (eight months)—were later found dead in the Barak River near the Manipur-Assam inter-State boundary.

According to investigators, the bodies were recovered in a decomposed condition and bore multiple injuries and signs of mutilation.

The incident had triggered widespread protests across the Imphal Valley, with agitated demonstrators targeting the residences of several Ministers and MLAs. Acting on directions from the Ministry of Home Affairs, the NIA took over the probe after re-registering the FIR initially lodged at Borobekra Police Station.

During the investigation, Thanglienal Hmar, identified as a key conspirator, was arrested on July 31, 2025, in a joint operation by the NIA and Assam Police. Two other accused were subsequently arrested, culminating in the filing of the charge sheet now taken cognisance of by the court.

64 lakh infiltrators entered Assam during Congress rule, BJP working to reverse trend: Amit Shah

GUWAHATI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday alleged that Assam's demography underwent a drastic change during the Congress regime, claiming that as many as 64 lakh infiltrators entered the State and became a majority in seven districts. He asserted that the BJP-led government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi is now working to reverse the trend.

Speaking as the chief guest at the closing ceremony of the 10th Mising Youth Festival organised by the Takam Mising Porin Kebang (All Mising Students' Union) at Kareng Chapori, Shah appealed to voters to back the BJP in the upcoming Assembly elections to ensure what he described as full protection of the State from infiltration.

"Assam's demography totally changed during the Congress rule. The population of infiltrators rose to 64 lakh from nil, and infiltrators became a majority in seven districts," Shah alleged.

The Home Minister said the Modi government had initiated multiple measures to address the issue. "If you

want to stop infiltration in Assam, elect the BJP for a third term and strengthen Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's hands in the fight against illegal immigrants. Two BJP governments in Assam have freed 1.26 lakh acres of land from encroachment by infiltrators," he said.

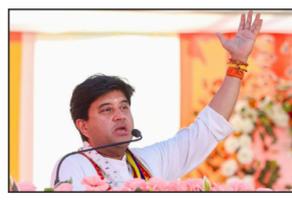
Shah also lauded the Mising community for preventing infiltrators from settling in Upper Assam, attributing it to their culture of hard work and self-reliance.

"It is the responsibility of the Mising community to stop infiltration. You do not need to take up arms. Through your culture of hard work, infiltrators have not been able to come to this side," he said.

He further alleged that several tribal communities struggled to protect their identity during the Congress regime and emphasised that the BJP was committed to addressing issues faced by the Mising society through a Centre-appointed interlocutor.

Assembly elections in Assam are due later this year.

Centre spends Rs 3.46 lakh crore on Northeast development since 2021



NEW DELHI

The Centre has spent more than Rs 3.46 lakh crore on development works in the North Eastern Region (NER) over the last four financial years, Parliament was informed on Thursday, underscoring sustained central investment in the region's infrastructure and social sectors.

In a written reply to a question in the Rajya Sabha, Minister of State for the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) Dr Sukanta Majumdar said over Rs 9,195 crore has been spent through the DoNER Ministry alone since 2021. He added that overall central government expenditure in the Northeast has consistently exceeded budgetary allocations during this period.

According to the Minister, spending in the region covers a wide range of sectors, including road infrastructure, healthcare, education, civil aviation and power, as part of the Centre's effort to position the Northeast as a key growth engine of the country.

Dr Majumdar said the government is guided by the principle of "Act East, Act Fast, Act First" to drive accelerated and inclusive development in the region. Under the mandatory 10 per cent Gross Budgetary Support (GBS)

mechanism, all non-exempted central ministries and departments are required to earmark at least 10 per cent of their annual budgetary allocations for the development of the Northeast.

Data shared in Parliament showed that cumulative expenditure on development works in the NER during the last four financial years stood at Rs 3.46 lakh crore, exceeding the cumulative allocation of Rs 3.20 lakh crore. In 2021-22, actual expenditure was Rs 70,874 crore against a revised estimate of Rs 68,440 crore. Spending rose to Rs 82,691 crore in 2022-23, surpassing the revised estimate of Rs 72,540 crore.

The upward trend continued in 2023-24, with actual expenditure of Rs 1,02,749 crore against a revised estimate of Rs 91,802 crore. For the financial year 2024-25, the government spent Rs 89,734.40 crore, again exceeding the revised estimate of Rs 87,736 crore.

Overall, actual expenditure during the four-year period amounted to nearly 108 per cent of the revised estimates, reflecting what the government described as a strong commitment to bridging long-standing developmental gaps in the Northeast.

The Centre said sustained higher spending has contributed to improvements in connectivity, access to basic services and economic opportunities, while helping integrate the Northeast more closely with national and regional growth corridors.

Dr Majumdar added that investments under various central schemes are aimed at ensuring balanced development across all eight northeastern states, while reinforcing the region's strategic and economic importance under India's broader Act East policy.

Assam to Revise History Books

GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday announced that the State government has decided to rewrite history textbooks at the high school level, directing the Education Department to initiate the process, even as he questioned certain historical narratives currently taught in schools.

Speaking at the closing ceremony of the 10th Mising Youth Festival organised by the Takam Mising Porin Kebang (All Mising Students' Union) at Kareng Chapori, Sarma raised doubts over the portrayal of Ahom warrior Bagh Hazarika in history textbooks, particularly his role in the 1671 Battle of Saraighat against the Mughals. "There was no Bagh Hazarika with Lachit Barphukan in the Battle of Saraighat. It was Mising leader Miri Handique who fought against the Mughals in Kamrup," the Chief Minister said, making the remarks in the presence of Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

Ismail Siddique, popularly known as Bagh Hazarika, is described in widely accepted historical accounts as a 17th-century Ahom warrior who fought alongside Lachit Barphukan during the Battle of Saraighat. He is believed to have been born into an Assamese Muslim family in Dhekerigaon village near Garhgaon in present-day Sivasagar district. While Sarma did not spell out the full scope of the proposed revisions, he said the decision to rewrite high school history textbooks had already been conveyed to Education Minister Ranoo Pegu.

"We have decided to rewrite history for high schools, and I have informed the education minister," he said.

EU-India trade pact will take Assam tea to Europe tariff-free: Amit Shah

DIBRUGARH

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday said the proposed EU-India free trade agreement would allow Assam tea to enter European markets with zero tariff, giving a major boost to the state's tea industry and exports.

Addressing a public rally at the Khanikar Parade Ground in Dibrugarh, Shah described the proposed agreement as a significant opportunity for Assam's garden economy and tea workers. He said Prime Minister Narendra Modi has already held engagements with key European nations, including France and Germany, and negotiations are underway with other members of the European Union to strengthen trade ties.

"Once the EU-India trade agreement is finalised, Assam tea will reach Europe without any tariff. This will enhance its global reach and competitiveness and benefit tea growers as well as workers," Shah said.

Highlighting India's evolving foreign policy, the Home Minister said the European Union has emerged as a trusted trade partner for India, sharing a common vision of a balanced and cooperative global order. He added that the trade pact would not only help exporters but also strengthen India's strategic and

economic standing on the global stage.

Shah paid tribute to Assam's tea garden workers, crediting them with giving the state a distinct identity and contributing to India's reputation as one of the world's leading tea producers. "Dibrugarh is known as the tea capital. It is because of the hard work of garden workers that the aroma of Assam tea has reached every corner of the world," he said.

Taking a swipe at the Congress, Shah claimed the BJP-led government has done more for the welfare of tea garden workers than previous regimes. He said the Centre has amended the Tea Act to ensure better rights and ownership benefits for garden workers, strengthening their economic security.

With Assam heading towards Assembly elections next year, Shah reiterated the BJP's commitment to empowering tea garden communities and positioning the state as a key export hub. "Tea garden workers form a politically significant voting bloc in Upper Assam, particularly in districts such as Dibrugarh.

The Home Minister's remarks came during his Assam visit aimed at strengthening the party's organisational base and highlighting the Centre's development and trade initiatives ahead of the 2026 Assembly polls.



48 connectivity, infrastructure projects worth Rs 6,044 crore sanctioned under PM-DevINE for Northeast

NEW DELHI

The Centre has sanctioned 48 projects worth Rs 6,044.36 crore under the Prime Minister's Development Initiative for North Eastern Region (PM-DevINE) to accelerate connectivity, infrastructure creation and economic development across the Northeast, Parliament was informed.

In a written reply to a question in the Rajya Sabha, Minister of State for the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) Dr Sukanta Majumdar said the projects are aimed at strengthening infrastructure, improving livelihoods and addressing critical development gaps in the region.

The Minister said the initiatives are aligned with the broader vision of the North-East Economic Corridor (NEEC), which seeks to transform the region into a major investment, trade and economic hub. To advance this vision, the Ministry of DoNER has constituted eight High-Level Task Forces (HLTFs) following a consensus reached at the 72nd plenary meeting of the North Eastern Council (NEC) held in Agartala in December 2024.

Each task force is headed by the

Chief Minister of a northeastern state. The HLTF on the North-East Economic Corridor is convened by the Chief Minister of Mizoram, with the Union DoNER Minister and the Chief Ministers of Assam, Meghalaya and Manipur as members. According to the government, three meetings of the NEEC task force have already been held.

Dr Majumdar said the PM-DevINE scheme focuses on the rapid and holistic development of the Northeast through infrastructure creation, region-specific social development projects, enhancement of livelihood opportunities for youth and women, and bridging long-pending sectoral gaps.

He added that the execution of projects sanctioned under DoNER schemes is carried out by implementing agencies of the respective state governments, with primary monitoring responsibility resting with the states.

To ensure transparency and quality, the Centre has established a multi-layered monitoring mechanism involving Field Technical Support Units, Project Quality Monitors, third-party inspection agencies, and periodic inspections by officials of DoNER and the NEC.



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HISTORIC INDO-EU FTA



The conclusion of the India-European Union Free Trade Agreement, aptly described as the “mother of all deals”, marks a watershed moment in the evolving architecture of global trade. At a time when tariff-driven protectionism, particularly emanating from the United States, has disrupted established supply chains and unsettled allies and competitors alike, the India-EU pact stands out as a bold counter-narrative: cooperation over confrontation, integration over isolation. What makes this agreement exceptional is its sheer scale and scope. In a single framework, 28 entities—India and the 27 EU member states—have committed to deep trade liberalisation, strategic cooperation and long-term alignment. Together, they account for nearly a quarter of global GDP and represent a market of two billion people. Few trade agreements in history have matched this magnitude, and fewer still have been concluded in such a fraught geopolitical climate.

In immediate terms, the tariff concessions are substantial. The EU’s decision to reduce or eliminate duties on 99 per cent of Indian exports will provide a powerful boost to labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, apparel, leather, handicrafts, footwear and marine products—areas critical for employment generation in India. For Indian exporters facing shrinking access to the US market due to tariff barriers and trade uncertainty, Europe emerges as a vital compensatory destination as India seeks to offset potential business losses, which could run into billions of dollars, arising from US trade actions.

For the EU, the agreement opens the doors to one of the world’s fastest-growing large markets. While India is currently a net importer in India-EU trade, the overall volume—about USD 136 billion—underscores the depth of existing engagement. Reduced tariffs on European wine, automobiles, chemicals, pharmaceuticals and high-end agricultural and dairy products will enhance competitiveness and expand consumer choice in India. For European producers grappling with sluggish domestic demand and disrupted transatlantic trade relations, India offers scale, growth and long-term stability.

The long-term implications, however, go far beyond tariff arithmetic. Much of Europe is no longer in the mass manufacturing race; it relies on external partners for cost-effective production. India, by contrast, is emerging as a global manufacturing hub, backed by a vast workforce capable of delivering quality products at competitive costs. The agreement can accelerate supply chain realignment, encourage European investment in Indian manufacturing, and deepen India’s integration into global value chains.

Conversely, Europe’s strength lies in advanced technology, high-end manufacturing and defence production. From world-class automobiles to sophisticated defence platforms, including fighter aircraft, EU countries possess capabilities that India seeks as it modernises its economy and armed forces. With relations between Europe and the US under strain, and Russia preoccupied with a prolonged war in Ukraine, the EU has both the incentive and the strategic space to deepen defence and technology partnerships with India. The FTA, complemented by the newly signed security and defence pact, provides an institutional foundation for such cooperation.

Equally significant is the agreement on emerging domains such as artificial intelligence. In an era where AI governance, ethics and standards will shape future competitiveness, India-EU coordination can ensure that innovation is balanced with regulation and that technological advancement supports inclusive growth. On the geopolitical plane, the India-EU compact sends a clear message. A well-knit economic bond among 28 democratic entities also has the potential to translate into deeper defence cooperation and coordinated positions on global platforms. For India, EU support can be leveraged in its fight against terrorism and in advancing reforms of global institutions. Collectively, such alignment can reshape international equations at a time when the old order is visibly fraying. The domestic spillovers should not be underestimated. Increased investment and export opportunities are likely to buoy manufacturing, generate employment and stabilise markets. Unsurprisingly, financial markets are expected to respond positively, encouraging the return of foreign institutional investors and reinforcing economic stability.

Practically, the Indo-EU FTA is a rare win-win in an otherwise unsettled global economy. More importantly, it signals the emergence of new, stronger partnerships capable of shaping a multipolar world order. In the midst of global upheaval, this agreement is not just a trade deal—it is a statement of intent about the future of globalisation itself.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

“The elevator to success is out of order. You’ll have to use the stairs, one step at a time.” - Joe Girard

MADURO SEIZURE AND GLOBAL FRACTURED GEOPOLITICS



The pre-dawn detention of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, by U.S. forces on January 3, 2026, represents a defining moment in modern geopolitics. Executed without reported bloodshed inside Caracas’s high-security presidential residence and followed by Maduro’s transfer to the United States, the operation has sharply challenged long-held assumptions about sovereignty, regime legitimacy, and the acceptable limits of unilateral action. Framed by President Donald Trump as a strike against authoritarian rule, drug trafficking, and corruption, the move has triggered intense debate well beyond Latin America. The episode is the culmination of a long deterioration in U.S.-Venezuela relations. Over more than a decade, ties have been shaped by sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and rival claims to political legitimacy. Yet the physical removal of a sitting head of state by foreign forces marks a clear escalation, rarely seen since the Cold War era. While Washington has defended the action on legal and security grounds, critics argue it risks destabilising an international system already under severe strain.

Maduro’s ascent followed the arc of Venezuela’s Bolivarian movement. Rising from a background as a trade unionist and bus driver, he entered national politics under Hugo Chávez, serving as foreign minister and later vice president. After Chávez’s death in 2013, Maduro narrowly secured the presidency of a deeply divided country. His tenure coincided with economic collapse, hyperinflation, and the emigration of millions. Politically, he consolidated authority through institutional changes, reliance on the military, and the sidelining of opposition bodies. Disputed elections and allegations of rights abuses intensified global criticism, while Maduro portrayed his rule as a defence of national sovereignty. The confrontation with Washington escalated gradually. Sanctions targeting oil revenues and financial access aimed to force change but instead pushed Caracas toward closer ties with Russia, China, and Iran. Failed efforts to empower opposition leadership gave way, under Trump’s return to office, to overt coercion.

The capture of Nicolás Maduro resonates globally, coming at a time of overlapping international crises. The Russia-Ukraine war, now in its fourth year, has already cost the West over USD 200 billion in military, economic, and humanitarian support, straining resources and attention. Meanwhile, U.S.-China tensions remain at a historic low, driven by trade disputes, technology restrictions, and escalating military activity near Taiwan, including large-scale Chinese exercises involving dozens of aircraft and naval vessels in 2024-25. In the Middle East, the Israel-Gaza conflict and wider regional instability continue to affect Red Sea shipping lanes, which handle roughly 12 per cent of global trade. In this environment, Washing-

ton’s unilateral operation signals a shift toward power-driven geopolitics, prioritising strategic outcomes over procedural consensus. Energy markets reacted swiftly: Venezuela’s 300-billion-barrel oil reserves make the country central to global supply, and even minor uncertainty can move prices. Past geopolitical shocks have driven Brent crude from under USD 75 to over USD 90 per barrel in weeks, highlighting sensitivity to instability. Politically, the operation challenges norms of sovereignty and non-intervention enshrined in the UN Charter. Proponents argue decisive measures are warranted against abusive regimes, but critics warn that undermining these norms leaves smaller and medium powers vulnerable and weakens the international order that has underpinned relative global stability for nearly eight decades.

The arrest of Nicolás Maduro along with his present wife, Cilia Flores, has highlighted deep fractures in the international system. The UN Security Council convened an emergency session but quickly fell into deadlock. Russia and China condemned the U.S. operation as a clear violation of sovereignty and international law, warning that it undermines the UN Charter. Their position aligns with historical patterns: since 2011, more than a dozen Security Council resolutions on Syria, Ukraine, and related crises have been vetoed, showing how great-power rivalry has weakened collective security mechanisms. Latin America’s response was divided. Countries like Mexico and Bolivia reaffirmed non-intervention principles, reflecting sensitivities shaped by a history of external interference. Other states, including some in the Caribbean and Central America, cautiously welcomed the removal of a leader accused of democratic erosion and economic mismanagement, though none endorsed the methods used.

This fragmentation mirrors broader ideological divides that have reduced the effectiveness of regional institutions like the Organization of American States. Europe’s reaction was measured. While recognising Venezuela’s human rights and governance issues, EU leaders emphasised due process and multilateralism, reflecting unease with unilateral action outside NATO frameworks. Past experiences, such as lengthy negotiations over Ukraine sanctions, have reinforced this cautious approach. Overall, the episode underscores a sobering reality: global institutions, designed for an earlier balance of power, are struggling to manage shocks from major powers, deepening the perception that multilateralism is increasingly subordinated to selective, interest-driven action.

The capture of Venezuela’s president has far-reaching implications, extending well beyond Latin America into some of the world’s most volatile regions. For Russia, the operation reinforces its long-standing narrative that Western powers selectively enforce international law while ignoring sovereignty when convenient. Moscow is likely to cite the event to justify its actions in Ukraine,

which has already caused hundreds of thousands of military and civilian casualties and represents Europe’s largest land war since 1945. Russian officials portray their campaign as defensive against Western encroachment, and Maduro’s capture strengthens this framing. China views the episode through the lens of Taiwan. Beijing has intensified military activity near the island, with record aircraft crossings of the Taiwan Strait median line in 2024-25. Washington’s unilateral action in Caracas may be seen as proof that the U.S. will bypass international norms when core interests are at stake, reinforcing Beijing’s push for accelerated military readiness and deterrence planning in the Indo-Pacific. In the Middle East, Iran and allied actors have cited the operation as evidence of U.S. unilateralism, raising the risk of escalation in proxy conflicts across the Gulf and Eastern Mediterranean. Taken together, these responses highlight a global environment where coercive power increasingly supersedes diplomacy, heightening the risk of miscalculation and regional instability across multiple theatres.

India’s calculus to Maduro’s capture has been cautious, reflecting its long-standing policy of strategic autonomy. New Delhi has avoided explicit endorsement or criticism, instead calling for restraint, dialogue, and respect for international law. This measured approach is consistent with India’s handling of other crises, including the Russia-Ukraine conflict, where it has emphasised diplomacy over alignment pressures. While the U.S. is now India’s largest trading partner, with bilateral trade surpassing USD 190 billion, this does not imply automatic policy alignment on questions of sovereignty or intervention. Territorial integrity and non-interference remain vital for India, given its own security concerns. The ongoing standoff with China along the Line of Actual Control, involving over 60,000 troops on both sides, heightens sensitivity to precedents that might legitimise unilateral military action.

The episode also highlights the importance of multipolar engagement. While India’s ties with Bangladesh and Pakistan remain unaffected, it underscores that middle powers must carefully balance deepening U.S. partnerships, maintaining relations with Russia, and managing China, all while defending international norms that constrain arbitrary power. The Maduro episode offers a critical moment for global leaders to reflect on an increasingly fragmented international system. For India and the European Union, the priority is to strengthen multilateral mediation and clarify the legal boundaries of using force. Convening emergency diplomatic forums through the UN General Assembly, where vetoes do not apply, or credible regional organisations can help de-escalate tensions and foster dialogue on acceptable state conduct, especially as the Security Council has repeatedly failed to reach consensus during major crises.

Reforming sanctions regimes

is equally urgent. Broad, economy-wide sanctions often inflict severe humanitarian harm without achieving intended political goals. More targeted measures with clearly defined exit strategies would improve legitimacy and effectiveness. Investments in conflict-prevention mechanisms, including early-warning systems, preventive diplomacy, and third-party mediation, can reduce the risk of escalation to military action. Strengthening international judicial mechanisms and upholding due process is vi-

DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

Moving towards the promise of a #FloodFreeAssam. Yesterday, Adarniya @AmitShah ji launched a ₹692cr project to restore & rejuvenate 15 wetlands in Assam selected through scientific assessment, which will bolster flood management in Brahmaputra river basin.
~ Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, CM, Assam



tal. Even in cases of severe governance failure, sustainable political change is more likely through negotiated transitions than abrupt, force-driven removals. Normalising unilateral interventions risks worsening global instability rather than resolving crises.

The capture of Maduro by U.S. forces is more than a dramatic show of power; it tests the resilience of the international system. While it may yield short-term gains for Washington, its long-term consequences are uncertain and potentially far-reaching, as precedents set by major powers rarely remain isolated.

If power increasingly outweighs principle in global politics, risks of instability, retaliation, and miscalculation will rise, leaving smaller and medium-sized states vulnerable. Reversing this trend requires renewed commitment to diplomacy, restraint, and institutional solutions, even when slow or politically inconvenient. Ultimately, the stability of the international order depends less on force and more on the willingness of states to uphold shared rules. In a world strained by overlapping conflicts, restraint—not spectacle—is the only sustainable path to collective security and lasting stability.

Amit Shah sets 'development, secure Assam' agenda as BJP eyes third straight term



GUWAHATI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday sharpened the BJP's campaign pitch for the upcoming Assam Assembly elections, declaring that the party would contest the polls on the twin planks of development and a secure Assam, while launching a sharp attack on the Congress over infiltration, demographic change and alleged governance failures.

During his two-day visit to the State, Shah held a closed-door meeting lasting over two hours with senior BJP leaders and office-bearers, where he outlined the party's electoral strategy. Briefing reporters later, BJP Assam president Dilip Saikia said the Home Minister offered key inputs drawn from his electoral experience and urged the State unit to aim for a landslide victory by winning more seats than in the previous Assembly elections.

Saikia said an action plan to retain power for a third consecutive term would be finalised soon.

Addressing public meetings in Dibrugarh and Dhemaji, Shah accused the Congress of encouraging infiltration for electoral gains and alleged that Assam's demography had been irreversibly altered during decades of Congress rule. He claimed the number of infiltrators had risen to 64 lakh and that they had become a majority in seven districts, asserting that BJP-led governments at the Centre and in Assam were now working to re-

verse the trend.

Stating that infiltration had compromised national security and Assam's social fabric, Shah said it must be stopped permanently. He urged voters to strengthen Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's hands by re-electing the BJP, claiming that the State government had freed 1.26 lakh acres of land from encroachment by illegal settlers.

He also highlighted the role of indigenous communities, particularly the Mising community, in preventing infiltrators from settling in Upper Assam.

Launching a blistering attack on Congress leaders, Shah accused Rahul Gandhi of repeatedly disrespecting the Northeast and said the Congress had little to offer Assam except unrest, corruption and insecurity. He alleged that during decades of Congress rule, the State saw minimal development, contrasting it with what he described as transformative changes under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership.

Shah listed a range of infrastructure and development initiatives undertaken by BJP governments, including roads, bridges, medical institutions and industrial projects, asserting that development had reached both tribal and non-tribal areas. He said the BJP's vision for Assam was one of inclusive growth backed by strong security and decisive governance.

The Home Minister also paid tribute to former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and criticised the Congress for its alleged failure to respect Assam's contributions and aspirations. Reiterating that development would remain the BJP's core plank, Shah said the party was fully prepared to contest the elections with a clear agenda.

Assembly elections in Assam are due in a few months. Shah concluded his visit by expressing confidence that the BJP would secure another mandate, banking on its development record, firm stance on infiltration and a promise of a safe and prosperous Assam.

Gaurav Gogoi urges PM Modi to confer Bharat Ratna on late Zubeen Garg

GUWAHATI

Congress MP from Jorhat and Deputy Leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party in the Lok Sabha, Gaurav Gogoi, has written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeking the posthumous conferment of the Bharat Ratna on legendary Assamese singer and cultural icon Zubeen Garg.

In his letter, Gogoi said Garg's untimely and tragic death had plunged Assam and the wider Northeast into deep grief, marking the loss of a towering cultural figure whose influence extended far beyond the region. He described the singer as not merely a celebrated artist, but a symbol of Assamese identity who carried the cultural voice of the Northeast to national and international platforms.

The MP noted that he had consistently raised the issue across institutional forums. He recalled that on December 3, 2025, he demanded a posthumous Bharat Ratna for Zubeen Garg during Zero Hour in the Lok Sabha. Gogoi also pointed out that on December 4, 2025, he had written to Exter-

nal Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar seeking clarity and accountability regarding the circumstances surrounding Garg's death, which occurred during an official Government of India cultural engagement abroad.

In his communication to the Prime Minister, Gogoi highlighted Zubeen Garg's unparalleled contribution to Indian music and culture, stating that his work took the Assamese language and artistic expression of the Northeast to audiences across India and the world. He said awarding the Bharat Ratna would be a fitting national tribute to an artist whose life's work transcended regional boundaries and became part of India's shared cultural heritage.

Meanwhile, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs has responded to Gogoi's earlier intervention in Parliament. In a written reply dated January 2026, Minister of State for Home Affairs Nityanand Rai referred to Gogoi's Zero Hour submission in the Lok Sabha on December 3, 2025, in which he had demanded the Bharat Ratna for the late singer.

Four Assam youths found dead in locked rented room in Bengaluru; probe underway

BENGALURU

In a shocking incident, four youths from Assam were found dead inside a locked rented room in the Mutsandra area of Bengaluru Rural district on Friday, triggering panic and raising questions over the circumstances surrounding their deaths.

The deceased have been identified as Jayanta Sinte Khageswar, Narendranath Taid, Doctor Taid and Dhananjay Taid. All four were reportedly employed at a Coca-Cola warehouse in the locality and were staying together in the rented accommodation. According to preliminary information, the bodies were discovered after local residents alerted the authorities. Police teams rushed to the spot and sealed the room as part of the investigation. Bengaluru Rural Superintendent of Police Chandrakant also visited the site to assess the situation.

The exact cause of death is yet to be determined. Police have registered a case and said all possible angles are being examined. The bodies have been sent for post-mortem examination, and forensic teams have been roped in to gather evidence from the scene. Family members of the deceased have alleged foul play, claiming the youths were deliberately murdered, adding to the mystery surrounding the case. Police officials said more clarity is expected after the post-mortem and forensic reports are received. Investigations are continuing.

KAAC Principal Secretary Mukul Saikia transferred; Dilip Terang given additional charge

GUWAHATI

The Assam government has effected a key administrative change at the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), transferring Mukul Kumar Saikia, IAS, from the post of Principal Secretary and assigning additional charge to Dilip Terang.

According to an official order, Saikia, an IAS officer of the 2011 batch (SCS), will be relieved as Principal Secretary of KAAC with effect from February 1, 2026. He has been posted as Secretary to the Government of Assam in the Information Department.

The transfer is part of a broader administrative reshuffle undertaken by the State government to rotate senior officials and streamline functioning across departments.

Following Saikia's transfer, Dilip Terang, ACS (DR-1999), who is currently serving as Secretary, Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, Diphu, has been entrusted

with the additional responsibility of in-charge Principal Secretary of KAAC. He will assume the role from February 1, 2026, and continue until further orders.

Officials said the move is aimed at ensuring administrative continuity at the Council, which plays a crucial role in governance and development in the Karbi Anglong region. Terang's experience within the KAAC administration is expected to facilitate a smooth transition.

The Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, headquartered in Diphu, oversees a wide range of administrative and developmental functions in the Sixth Schedule area. Changes at the level of Principal Secretary are closely monitored, given their impact on policy implementation and service delivery.

The government has not indicated how long Terang will hold additional charge, stating only that the arrangement will remain in force until further instructions.

Assam, Manipur, Tripura artists to be honoured at National Youth Cultural Festival 2026

IMPHAL

Young artists from Assam, Manipur, and Tripura are set to be recognised at the 2nd National Youth Cultural Festival 2026, scheduled to begin on February 11 in Imphal.

Renowned Manipuri film and theatre artist RK Hemabati Devi will be conferred with the Thangjam Birachandra and Thangjam Ongbi Maipakpi Memorial Lifetime Achievement Award 2026 for her exceptional contributions to the arts. The award includes a cash prize, a shawl, a citation, a memento, and a medal.

The recipients of various awards were officially announced by Ipak Films Production, Manipur, in collaboration with the Jaideep Memorial Foundation, Imphal. Festival chairman Khwairakpam Bishwamitra Singh formally released the list of awardees.

Notable awardees include: Mangka Mayanglam - Folk singer, Manipur; Benita Laishram - Folk



performer, Manipur
" Sonia Samjetsabam -
Film actor, Manipur
" Asha Singha - Manipuri
dance, Tripura
" Jaya Khundrakpam -
Classical Manipuri dance, Manipur
" Th Sanjana Singha -

Folk dance, Assam
" Songthu James Koireng -
Theatre, Manipur
" Mutum Herojit Singh -
Martial arts, Manipur
" Loitongbam Barashyam -
Public performance, Manipur
The awards ceremony will be held at 2 pm on February 11 at the

Palace Auditorium, Manipur State Film Development Society (MS-FDS), Imphal, coinciding with the festival's inauguration. This festival aims to celebrate and promote the region's vibrant youth-led cultural landscape, bringing together talent from across the Northeast.

Assam must safeguard its manuscript heritage for future generations: Governor

GUWAHATI

Assam's rich manuscript heritage must be preserved as a living body of knowledge rather than remaining confined to archives, Governor of Assam Lakshman Prasad Acharya said on Thursday.

The Governor, who is also the Chancellor of Gauhati University, was speaking at the inaugural session of a two-day workshop on "Manuscripts of Assam", organised under the Governor Assam Bhasha Protsahan Yojana 2025 by Lok Bhavan, Assam, in collaboration with Gauhati University.

Emphasising the cultural and civilisational significance of Assam's manuscripts, Acharya said they embody centuries of intellectual thought, linguistic traditions and collective memory, and must be systematically documented, studied and transmitted to future generations through sustained institutional and scholarly efforts. "These manuscripts are not relics meant



only for archives," the Governor said. "They represent centuries of intellectual thought and cultural wisdom. Preserving, studying and reconnecting them with contemporary society is a collective responsibility of academic institutions, scholars and the wider community." Vice-Chancellor of Gauhati University, Prof. Nani Gopal Mahanta, highlighted the university's historic role in preserving Assam's linguistic and cultural legacy. Referring to the tradition of Sanchipat and other indigenous

manuscripts, he said Gauhati University has long acted as a custodian of the region's intellectual heritage. Quoting Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, Prof. Mahanta reiterated the university's commitment to ensuring that Assam's manuscript traditions remain accessible and relevant to future generations.

The inaugural session featured a keynote address by Prof. Malinee Goswami, former Vice-Chancellor of Assam Women's University, Jorhat, who underscored the scholarly and

historical importance of Assamese manuscripts. Dr. Sangeeta Gogoi, Director (in-charge) of the Directorate of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (DHAS), Assam, attended as a resource person and spoke on key aspects of manuscript conservation and research. Dhanjit Talukdar, Archival Assistant of the Manuscripts Section at the Krishna Kanta Handiqui Library, Gauhati University, also addressed participants on documentation and preservation practices. The programme began with an opening address by S.S. Meenakshi Sundaram, Commissioner and Secretary to the Governor of Assam. Others present included Prof. Bechan Lal, Officer on Special Duty to the Governor; Prof. Harbansh Dixit, Adviser, Lok Bhavan, Assam; and Dr. Deepi Rekha Kouli, Director of the Directorate of Archaeology, Assam, along with senior academicians, researchers and students.

Pawan Khera accuses Himanta of dodging corruption charges, says CM "hiding behind Pakistan"



GUWAHATI

The Congress launched a sharp attack on Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, accusing him of deflecting attention from alleged corruption and land-related issues by repeatedly invoking Pakistan in his public remarks.

Reacting to recent statements by the Chief Minister, Congress communications department head Pawan Khera said Sarma had been "singing the same tune for the past year" because he had no answers to serious allegations levelled against his government.

"He doesn't have answers to his own corruption. Around 1.5 lakh acres of land belonging to local Assamese tribal communities and sons of the soil have been handed over to corporate interests close to Prime Minister Narendra Modi," Khera alleged.

He claimed that key social groups in the State were increasingly dissatisfied with the government's policies. According to Khera, tea garden workers and tribal communities were seeking answers on land rights, livelihoods and welfare measures, but their concerns were not being addressed.

"Instead of responding to these questions, the Chief Minister is resorting to polarising rhetoric and externalising blame.

That is why he is hiding behind Pakistan," the Congress leader said, suggesting that references to national security were being used to divert public attention from governance failures within Assam. Khera also targeted Union Home Minister Amit Shah over unfulfilled promises made to tea garden workers and indigenous communities. Referring to Shah's recent statement in Dibrugarh, Khera asked, "What happened to the promise of minimum support price for tea gardens? What happened to the six tribes who were promised Scheduled Tribe status? Narendra Modi said it would be done in six months. Amit Shah said it would be done in five years. Twelve years have passed, and those tribes are still waiting."

The Congress has consistently targeted the BJP-led Assam government over its land policies, alleging that the interests of indigenous and tribal communities are being compromised. The party has also accused the government of neglecting tea garden workers, a politically significant group in Upper Assam.

The BJP has rejected the Congress allegations in the past, maintaining that land allotments and development projects are being carried out transparently and in the interest of economic growth.

Connectivity push gathers pace in Northeast as roads, railways and digital networks expand

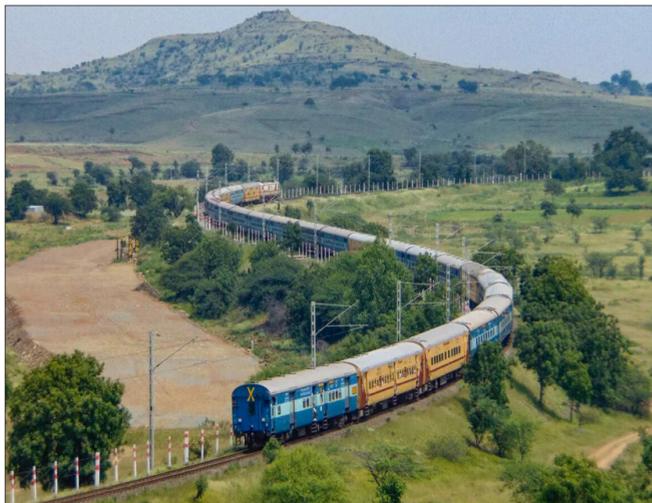
NEW DELHI

Connectivity projects across the North Eastern Region have gathered momentum, with major expansion in road, rail and digital infrastructure, the Centre informed Parliament.

In a written reply in the Rajya Sabha, Minister of State for the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) Dr Sukanta Majumdar said the Centre's focus on connectivity aims to integrate the Northeast more closely with the national economy, improve access to essential services and generate employment and economic activity.

According to the Minister, the length of National Highways in the region has increased significantly over the past decade, from 10,905 km in 2014 to 16,207 km as of April 1, 2025. At present, 177 national highway projects covering a total length of 3,635 km are under various stages of implementation in the Northeast, with an estimated investment of Rs 87,119 crore.

Rural connectivity has also improved substantially under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY). Since the inception of the scheme, 17,666 road works spanning 89,503 km and 2,386 bridge works



have been sanctioned across the northeastern states. Of these, 16,547 road works covering 81,448 km and 2,126 bridges have been completed, with total expenditure amounting to Rs 53,353.49 crore, including the states' share.

Dr Majumdar said the DoNER Ministry has independently sanctioned 647 road and bridge projects under its various schemes

at a cost of Rs 8,260.88 crore. Of these, 500 projects worth Rs 4,915 crore have already been completed, further strengthening intra-regional connectivity.

On rail infrastructure, the Minister said projects are planned and executed on a zonal basis as they often span multiple states and districts. As of April 1, 2025, a total of 12 railway projects comprising eight new lines

and four doubling projects—with a combined length of 777 km and an estimated cost of Rs 69,342 crore have been sanctioned in the Northeast. So far, 278 km of these projects has been commissioned.

Digital connectivity has also expanded rapidly in the region. Under the BharatNet project, 6,355 Gram Panchayats in the Northeast have been made service-ready for high-bandwidth internet connectivity as of December 2025. In addition, under the government-funded 4G Saturation Project and other mobile connectivity initiatives, 3,718 mobile towers have been commissioned, covering 5,366 villages and locations.

The government noted that implementation timelines for connectivity projects in the Northeast have been affected by factors such as difficult terrain, land availability, statutory clearances and logistical challenges unique to the region. Despite these constraints, it maintained that sustained investment in connectivity is critical for the region's long-term development. According to the Centre, improved connectivity has led to faster movement of essential goods and agricultural produce, better access to markets, growth in tourism and industry, increased employment opportunities and stronger socio-economic integration of the Northeast with the rest of the country. Dr Majumdar said the connectivity push remains a key pillar of the government's strategy to unlock the economic potential of the northeastern states and ensure balanced regional development.

Quest!

Sweet potato ranks number 1 in nutrition of all vegetables.

HAL says five Tejas Mk-1A jets ready, but delivery to IAF may miss deadline again



NEW DELHI

HAL has announced that five Tejas Mk-1A fighter jets are ready for induction after completing weapons trials, but defence sources say delivery to the Indian Air Force (IAF) is likely to be delayed due to pending certification and operational clearances.

Speaking at a press conference in Hyderabad earlier this week, Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) Chairman and Managing Director D.K. Sunil said, "Five Tejas Mk-1A aircraft are ready. We have completed firing and missile trials. We would be approaching the IAF to take these five fighters in the current financial year."

However, sources in the defence and security establishment said that although the jets have successfully completed weapons trials, including the firing of two missiles and the release of a laser-guided bomb, final Staff Qualitative Requirements (SQR) certification and mandatory operational demonstrations are still pending, a requirement for formal

induction into service. "SQRs lay down the IAF's performance benchmarks for induction. Beyond weapons trials, they cover flight envelope validation, avionics and sensor integration, electronic warfare performance, reliability and maintainability parameters and operational suitability checks. Only after these are demonstrated and certified can the aircraft be formally accepted," a source explained.

The TNIE also reached out to HAL. "We expect to offer the five aircraft for delivery in March, after which the IAF will finalise acceptance and work out the details of the handover," a HAL official said.

As reported earlier by the TNIE, HAL had announced a revised delivery target of March during the debut flight of the LCA Mk-1A in Nashik in October last year. In September, the PSU had also indicated that the first two aircraft from the 83-aircraft order would be delivered by October, a timeline that was subsequently missed.

Under the Rs. 48,000-

crore contract signed in February 2021 for 73 Tejas Mk-1A fighters and 10 trainers (totalling 83 aircraft), the first aircraft was scheduled for delivery within three years. However, the programme has been delayed by nearly three years.

In November 2023, the Defence Acquisition Council cleared procurement of an additional 97 Mk-1A fighters at an estimated cost of Rs. 66,500 crore, with final contract approval issued August last year. Once these aircraft are delivered, the IAF's Tejas Mk-1A fleet is expected to reach around 180 aircraft.

HAL currently has a production capacity of 24 aircraft per year. At this rate, fulfilling the 180-aircraft order will take more than seven years, with the IAF expected to receive the full Mk-1A fleet no earlier than around 2033.

The continued delays, which have also been linked to disruptions in the supply of GE F404 engines, come at a time when the IAF is grappling with a critical fighter squadron shortfall, with 29 active squadrons against a sanctioned strength of 42.5.

India set to boost Arab ties at Foreign Ministers' meet

NEW DELHI

Ahead of the second India-Arab Foreign Ministers' Meeting in New Delhi on Saturday, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Friday held talks with League of Arab States Secretary General Ahmed Aboul Gheit, focusing on strengthening India-Arab cooperation across political, economic and strategic domains amid heightened regional and global uncertainties. Following the meeting, Jaishankar described the interaction as "warm" and said the discussions covered a wide range of issues. "Had a wide-ranging conversation about our cooperation and strengthening it across various domains. Also exchanged views on the recent developments in the region," the minister said in a post on X.

Aboul Gheit arrived in New Delhi on Thursday to attend the second India-Arab Foreign Ministers' Meeting (IAFMM) and related engagements, marking a significant moment in India's engagement with the Arab world. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said the visit reflects a shared commitment to strengthening the India-Arab partnership across sectors. "High-level engagements over the next two days reflect the shared commitment for a stronger India-Arab partnership," MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said.

India is hosting the second IAFMM on January 31, co-chaired by India and the United Arab Emirates. The meeting will see participation from Foreign Ministers of Arab League member states, along with ministers of state, deputy ministers and senior officials. This is the first time India is hosting the India-Arab Foreign Ministers' Meeting in New Delhi. The IAFMM,



the highest institutional mechanism guiding India-Arab engagement, is taking place after a gap of nearly a decade. The first such meeting was held in Manama, Bahrain, in January 2016, when both sides identified five priority verticals for cooperation, economy, energy, education, media and culture, and adopted the Manama Declaration and an Executive Programme for implementation.

Ahead of the ministerial dialogue, the fourth India-Arab Senior Officials' Meeting was held on Friday, setting the agenda and reviewing progress under the cooperation framework. The current meeting is expected to expand collaboration in emerging areas while reinforcing existing partnerships in

trade, energy security, connectivity and people-to-people ties.

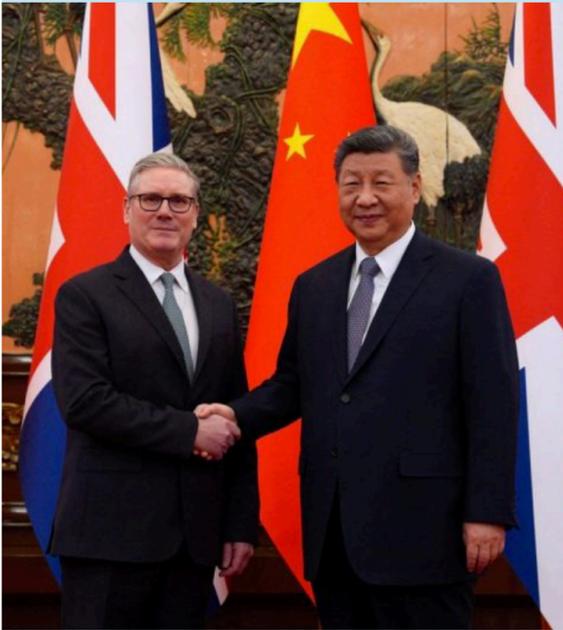
India's engagement with the Arab League is underpinned by strong economic and strategic linkages. India-Arab trade stands at over USD 240 billion, with bilateral hydrocarbon trade exceeding USD 107 billion and accounting for nearly half of overall trade. Arab League countries supply more than 95 per cent of India's LPG imports, around 60 per cent of LNG and nearly 47 per cent of crude oil requirements, besides over 50 per cent of fertilisers and related products. Critical sea lanes such as the Suez Canal, Red Sea and Gulf of Aden remain vital for India's external trade.

Indian companies have a significant footprint in the energy

sector across several Arab countries, including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Oman and Egypt. Cooperation also spans food security, financial services, healthcare, education, information technology, renewable energy, start-ups and large infrastructure projects. Over nine million Indians live and work across Arab League nations, forming a key pillar of the relationship. The League of Arab States, formed in Cairo in 1945, currently has 22 member states across West Asia and North Africa. India has Observer status in the LAS and has institutionalised dialogue through an MoU signed in 2002. The Arab-India Cooperation Forum was established in 2008 and revised in 2013 to strengthen structural engagement.

INTERNATIONAL

Elephants and football diplomacy on Starmer's 'historic' China trip



SHANGHAI

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer concludes an official visit to China on Saturday -- a four-day tour of Beijing and Shanghai that he described as "historic".

While in the country, Starmer discussed trade, football and elephants with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. Here is what to know about the trip.

Starmer is the first British prime minister to visit China in eight years. "They say that eight days is a long time in politics. Try eight years," he said upon arriving in Beijing.

Starmer met with Chinese

officials, including Xi, on Thursday.

The two leaders spoke for about three hours -- longer than initially scheduled, Downing Street noted.

Clouding the visit was criticism by US President Donald Trump, who warned that rapprochement between London and Beijing was "very dangerous".

Speaking to business leaders, Starmer summarised his goal in China with a parable.

"President Xi tells the story of blind men being presented with an elephant. One touches the leg and thinks it's a pillow. Another feels the belly and thinks it's a

wall," Starmer said.

"Too often this reflects how China is seen. But I profoundly believe that broader and deeper engagement, which we've been talking about all this week, is our way of seeing the whole elephant and therefore building a more sophisticated relationship fit for these times."

Xi echoed calls for engagement, telling Starmer the countries should "strengthen dialogue and cooperation". Starmer rarely misses an opportunity to discuss the English Premier League, the world's most-watched football competition, with his foreign counterparts.

On Thursday, Starmer presented Xi Jinping with a football from a recent match between Arsenal -- Starmer's favourite club -- and Manchester United, which Xi reportedly supports.

Xi, often characterised by Chinese state media as an avid reader of world literature in his youth, also discussed Shakespeare, Starmer said.

Starmer faces a challenging situation at home, where he is striving to deliver on campaign promises to reduce undocumented immigration, boost growth and combat the high cost of living.

While in China, Starmer touted the benefits his visit will have for British people, including visa-free travel for UK citizens on stays of less than 30 days, Downing Street said.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, left, shakes hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping ahead of a meeting in Beijing Thursday, Jan. 29, 2026. Starmer calls for UK to

have a deeper relationship with China during 'challenging times'.

A spokesman for Beijing's foreign ministry specified Friday that the measure will come into effect "at an appropriate time upon completing the necessary procedures".

Starmer also highlighted a reduction in customs duties on whisky exports. Downing Street said this would bring in an estimated 250 million pounds (\$343 million) over the next five years.

The prime minister urged business leaders in his delegation to seize opportunities in China, but to do so in a way that benefits Britain, where the cost of living is the "number one concern".

Starmer was tight-lipped on how discussions went over more contentious aspects of the relationship, such as Beijing's treatment of the Uyghur Muslim minority in Xinjiang.

He confirmed that he raised the case of Hong Kong pro-democracy media mogul Jimmy Lai, 78, who is facing years in prison after being found guilty of collusion charges in December.

Starmer noted a "respectful discussion" with Xi about Lai and the treatment of Uyghurs. A British official familiar with the talks confirmed that the subjects had received attention.

"If you engage, you can raise the difficult issues," Starmer said.

The prime minister also said that the strategy played an instrumental role in securing the lifting of sanctions imposed by Beijing in 2021 on some British parliamentarians.

Bangladesh set for polls, reform referendum amid uncertain voter mood



DHAKA

Bangladesh is going to the polls along with a referendum on reforms in less than two weeks in a dramatically changed political landscape, with the once-dominant Awami League barred from contesting and many voters expressing uncertainty over their choices.

Over 127 million people are eligible to cast their ballots in the February 12 polls, widely regarded as the country's most important election in decades and the first since the mass uprising that ended Sheikh Hasina's rule in August 2024.

Interim government Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus has described the dual exercise as a "grand festival" and said it would be the most free, fair and peaceful vote in the country's history, laying the foundation for what he called a "new Bangladesh".

But observers say the absence of a major political party and rising political tensions have weakened the competitive character of the election and raised concerns about stability and legitimacy.

With the deposed prime minister Hasina-led Awami League out of the race, the contest has narrowed mainly to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP),

seen as the frontrunner, and the Jamaat-e-Islami and its allies.

Despite the ban, the Awami League, which led Bangladesh's 1971 Liberation War against Pakistan, is believed to retain a large base of supporters who now find themselves politically sidelined.

"I feel little enthusiasm. I am not sure if I will vote. I don't know whom I should vote for," said Kader Mia, a Dhaka-based tailor in his mid-40s and a lifelong Awami League supporter.

Another supporter in the southwestern city of Barisal, who runs a small garment shop and did not wish to be named, said staying away from the polls could endanger his family as they might be identified as Hasina's supporters and "radical right-wing elements" can target them.

The interim government disbanded the Awami League under the Anti-Terrorism Law months after it was removed from power on August 5, 2024, following violent student-led protests known as the July Uprising that forced Hasina into exile in India. A special tribunal sentenced Hasina to death in November last year on charges of crimes against humanity linked to her crackdown on protesters, a verdict that many

Bangladeshi and foreign analysts have described as "rushed" and "flawed".

Yunus has suggested that Awami League voters are "up for grabs", while Hasina, in interviews with international and Indian media, has said her supporters could boycott the polls.

She warned that a government "born of exclusion" would fail to unite a divided nation and would lead to prolonged instability in Bangladesh.

Sensing an opportunity, the BNP has appealed to Awami League supporters by stressing "secular nationalism".

The party ended its long-standing alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami in August 2025, a move analysts see as an effort to attract voters who once backed the Hasina-led party.

BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman and Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir have increasingly referred to the values of the 1971 Liberation War, the core pillar of Awami League's identity, to signal shared patriotic roots.

In a recent public address, Alamgir said Hasina had fled to India, leaving her supporters "vulnerable" and "in trouble" and claimed the BNP was now "standing by them in a difficult time".

Skills, Discipline and Direction: Biswadeep Gupta's Message to Youth on Jobs and Life

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VOLUNTEERS REGISTERS @ NEIR 2026

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OUR CORRESPONDENT

In a time when many young people are worried about jobs, careers and the future, the KRC Foundations team delivered a clear and practical message. The team, led by its Managing Trustee and CEO Biswadeep Gupta, stressed that getting employed is not only about degrees. It is about habits, skills and mindset.

Addressing students and youth, Biswadeep Gupta spoke at length about accountability, timeliness, employability and practical skills. He said these are not optional qualities anymore. They are basic needs for anyone who wants to survive and grow in today's competitive world.

He explained that many young people fail not because they lack talent, but because they lack discipline. Being accountable means taking responsibility for one's own actions, time and learning. Being timely means respecting deadlines, punctuality and commitments. According to him, employers value these qualities as much as technical knowledge.

The 5Es for Life and Career During his interaction, Biswadeep Gupta shed light on what he called the 5Es, a simple but powerful framework for youth to follow in life and career.

The first E is Education, but not just classroom education. He stressed learning that adds value and builds understanding. Education should prepare a person for real life, not just exams.

The second E is Employability. He explained that employability is the ability to get and keep a job. This depends on communication skills, attitude, adaptability and willingness to learn new things. A degree alone does not make someone employable.

The third E is Employment. He said employment brings dignity, stability and confidence. Even small jobs can teach big lessons. What matters is honesty and effort in work.



Men are happiest when they are improving themselves physically, mentally, and financially. An idle man is a depressed man.



The fourth E is Entrepreneurship. Biswadeep Gupta encouraged youth not to fear starting something of their own. Entrepreneurship creates jobs, builds leadership and strengthens society. He said not everyone will get a government or corporate job, but everyone can learn to create opportunities.

The fifth E is Emotional Intelligence. Emotional intelligence means knowing feelings. Yours and other people's too.

It is not about being soft. It is about being aware. Why it matters. High IQ may get you a job. High emotional intelligence helps you keep it. It helps in love. In family. In teams. In life. How to grow it.

Pause before reacting. Even two seconds help.

Name your feeling. Give it words. Listen more than you speak. Do not win every argument. Ask, what might they be feeling right now?

Strong minds think fast. Wise minds feel deep.

Skills, income and knowledge empower a person. Empowered youth can support families, help communities and contribute to the nation.

Focus on Professional Skills

The NEIR team placed strong emphasis on professional skills and skill-based courses. Biswadeep Gupta said the future belongs to those who are skilled, not just educated. Courses in technology, communication, management, trades and services can open many doors. He pointed out that industries today look for people who can perform from day one. Practical training, internships and hands-on experience are becoming more important than marksheets. He advised students to invest time in learning skills alongside their studies.

Jobs and Skills for a Better Life

According to Gupta, leadership, jobs and skills are not only important for earning money. They are essential for building confidence, discipline and a sense of purpose. A skilled person can adapt to change and face challenges with courage.

Biswadeep Gupta said that career planning should start early. Youth should understand their strengths, interests and opportunities around them. Blindly following others often leads to frustration. Clear goals and continuous learning are the real keys to success.

A Practical Message

The interaction ended with a strong appeal to youth to take life seriously but positively. He urged them to respect time, keep learning, stay honest and work hard. Success, he said, is a result of small daily efforts done with discipline. He also spoke about identity and made it clear and meaningful. His message was simple yet powerful. In a changing world, skills, accountability and the right attitude can shape not just careers, but entire lives.

NEIR 2026: One Northeast, One Spirit NEZCC director Dr. Prashanna Gogoi praises NEIR 2026



OUR CORRESPONDENT

NEIR 2026 is more than a cultural programme. It is a living idea. It speaks about togetherness. It speaks about one Northeast. Many lands. Many languages. Many faiths. But one shared soul.

The core of NEIR 2026 is simple. Unity without loss of identity. Every community keeps its voice. Every culture keeps its colour. Yet all walk together. That is the essence.

Across the Northeast, people often live close, but feel distant. History, borders, fear, and misunderstanding created walls.

NEIR 2026 is trying to gently break those walls. Not with loud slogans. But with culture. With memory. With shared spaces.

A strong message of this vision came through a video address by Dr. Prashanna Gogoi, Director, North East Zone Cultural Centre. His words were calm, but deep. He welcomed the NEIR 2026 initiative and openly praised the organisers for their sincere effort.

Dr. Gogoi spoke about culture as a bridge. He said culture does not divide. It connects. Dance, music, stories, and history remind people that pain and hope are shared experiences. The

Northeast, he said, has always been rich in this shared heritage.

He gave special importance to the INA Museum at Moirang in Manipur. Moirang is not just a place. It is a memory of sacrifice. It is where the Indian National Army hoisted the tricolour for the first time on Indian soil. That moment belongs to every Indian. Not one state. Not one community.

Dr. Gogoi said places like the INA Museum teach unity without speeches. When people from different parts of the Northeast stand there together, they feel the same pride. The same emotion. History becomes a common ground.

As part of NEIR 2026, the KRC Foundations took part in an event at Moirang. Their presence carried strong meaning. It showed how civil groups, not just governments, are important in building unity. The visit was not ceremonial. It was emotional. It was reflective.

Through such visits, NEIR

2026 is turning history into dialogue. Young people see the past. Elders share stories. Communities listen to each other. Slowly, trust grows.

Dr. Gogoi also stressed the value of oneness. He said unity does not mean sameness. The Northeast is powerful because of its diversity. Unity means respect. It means listening. It means standing together during crisis and celebration.

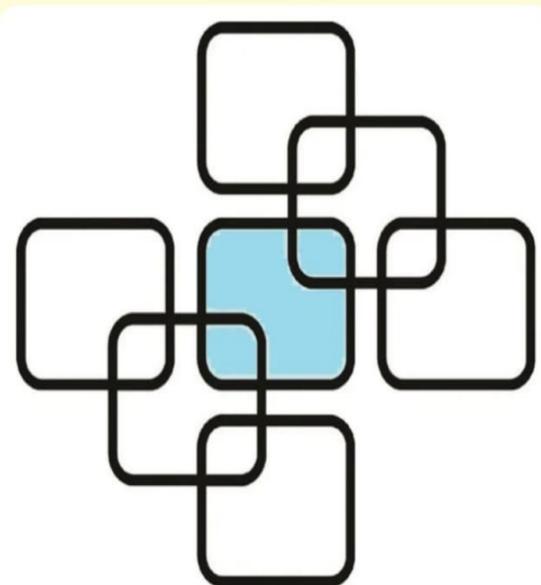
NEIR 2026 is working on this idea in many ways. Cultural exchanges. Shared events. Community visits. Youth participation. Each activity carries the same message. You are different. And you belong.

In a region often painted only with conflict, NEIR 2026 offers another picture. A picture of shared songs. Shared memories. Shared future.

The message is clear. Northeast India does not need to be stitched together. It is already connected. NEIR 2026 is simply reminding people of that truth.



In Collaboration with



NEZCC

NEIR 2026



BARAK FESTIVAL

JANUARY 10-12, 2025

ACTIVITY PROGRAM





10 JAN
NE Cultural Fest
 Any Form of Art and Cultural showcase can be showcased here.
 The Top performances will be invited to perform in the Main Event.
 Schools, Colleges, University Department, Individual & Group Competition.



11 JAN
Adventure Sports
 Trekking & Canoe, Obstacle Navigation, Sport Climbing, Disaster Management Technique, Water Sports.
www.krcfoundation.org



11 JAN
Barak Valley Conclave
 Potential Issues and Challenges of Barak Valley to be discussed by stakeholders.
 Includes: MOU, and 20 general discussion topics for Barak valley. Includes 50 seats for members and general public. Participation through invitation only. 5 different awards are provided.



12 JAN
River-Climate Conclave
 Climate Change will influence on Climate Change, pollution and river flooding. The Conclave will focus on the importance, technical and protection of River Barak. Training & Geography competitive and certification. River Barak, Climate Change.



JAN'25
Online Global Fest
 All can participate online and send a video clip on Poems, Songs and Dance Performances, 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'.
 Media Conclave: Workshops, Seminars, and Conferences are part of the 'Barak Festival 2025'. Theme: 'One for All, All for One'.
 Workshops: Journalism, Photography, Design & Creative Arts, Sports, Games, Animation, Robotics.



BROADCAST PARTNER



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11 JAN
5E For Success Conclave
 The 4th Annual Success Conclave is going to be held at the theme: 'From School to Campus to Corporate'. Schools, Educational Institutions and corporate houses can join the Conclave as sponsors.
 Quiz and Group Discussion for Barak valley Schools & Colleges. Extension: School, Public Speaking (College).
 In the online event, various students of NE India Schools and Colleges can participate.



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'.
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 Workshops: Journalism, Photography, Design & Creative Arts, Sports, Games, Animation, Robotics.

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'.

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



10-12 JAN
Book Bank
 #NoLike Campaign Book Bank at Silchar | online

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

Painting Carnival
 Water Colour and Paint and Draw with Campaign

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



Barak Festival
Band Night 10 JAN
Musical Night 11 JAN



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 WP: 0721300019
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