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PERSPECTIVE

There is only one person you spend your whole life with, and that is you. If you aren't ok with you, there is a problem.

Assam Cabinet clears record single-day Orunodoi DBT

GUWAHATI
The Assam Cabinet on Thursday approved what Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma described as the highest-ever single-day Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) rollout in the state's history under the Orunodoi scheme.

On March 10 at 11 am, around 39.70 lakh beneficiaries will receive a consolidated amount of Rs 9,000 each, amounting to nearly Rs 3,600 crore to be transferred in a single day. "This will be the highest single-day transfer of funds to beneficiaries in the history of Assam. Meetings will be held across every panchayat, municipal ward and autonomous council area to mark the distribution. The central programme will take place at Jyoti Bishnu Kala Kendra in Khanapara," Sarma told reporters after the Cabinet meeting.

The Cabinet also approved a major policy decision to decentralise administrative powers by granting initial tender authority to key autonomous councils in the state.

Under the new decision, the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council will be empowered to handle preliminary tender processes for smaller development projects.

"For works related to PWD, water resources, flood control or irrigation costing below Rs 10 crore, the initial tender process will be handled by these councils," Sarma said, adding that final settlement authority would continue to rest with the state government.

He said the move is aimed at expediting implementation of government schemes in Sixth Schedule areas. According to the Chief Minister, the proposal had been placed before the Cabinet by BTC Chief Hagrama Mohilary and has now received approval.

WHO SAID WHAT



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and I held an expanded meeting in Jerusalem earlier today, together with our teams. We signed a series of agreements on economic, security and diplomatic cooperation, further strengthening the strategic partnership between Israel and India. ~ Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel

2,293 mainstreamed teachers begin indefinite stir over salary budget head

KOHIMA
In a fresh flashpoint for the state's education sector, 2,293 members of the Nagaland Government Teachers' Association (NGTA) launched an indefinite protest in Kohima, demanding that their salaries be routed through the state's non-plan expenditure head instead of Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS).

Teachers from the 2010 and 2013 recruitment batches staged a demonstration outside the Directorate of School Education, asserting that despite being mainstreamed into the State Education Cadre more than three years ago, their pay continues to be drawn under CSS heads linked to the erstwhile Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA).

Addressing reporters at the protest site, NGTA representatives said they were formally mainstreamed into the State Education Cadre through a government order dated September 2, 2022, with retrospective effect from April 21, 2022, following approval by the state cabinet.



However, the association alleged that their salary component remains under CSS budget heads rather than the state's non-development (non-plan) expenditure account, which they argue is inconsistent with their current status as regular state cadre employees.

"We have been integrated into the state cadre, and we are governed by the same service rules as other government teachers. Yet, our salaries are still being released under CSS, which often results in delays," an NGTA representative said.

The association stated that multiple

representations submitted to the government seeking a shift of their salary component to the state's non-plan budget head have not elicited a concrete response. After issuing a seven-day ultimatum on February 16 and observing a two-day pen-down strike earlier this week, the teachers escalated their agitation with an indefinite protest beginning February 26.

Responding to the agitation, the School Education Department issued a clarification outlining the background of the appointments.

According to the department, the

2010 and 2013 batch teachers were initially appointed against posts created under Centrally Sponsored Schemes, with salary support from the Government of India. While the recruitment advertisements and appointment orders did not explicitly mention SSA or RMSA conditions, the posts were linked to CSS funding at the time.

The department stated that following demands from the teachers to be mainstreamed into the State School Education Cadre, the matter was examined in consultation with the Personnel and Administrative Reforms and Finance departments. With state cabinet approval, all 2,293 teachers who fulfilled eligibility criteria under the Nagaland School Education Service Rules, 2017 were mainstreamed into the cadre on September 2, 2022. It further maintained that the mainstreamed teachers are currently drawing pay under the 7th Revision of Pay and enjoying scale pay and other entitlements at par with regular state government employees. They are also governed by the same service rules applicable to the state education cadre.

However, the department clarified

that the question of the budget head from which salaries are disbursed does not fall within the prerogative of employees. It added that representations regarding the salary head have been forwarded to the concerned authorities for consideration. Officials also pointed out that consultations were held on June 2 last year with teachers' representatives by the Adviser for School Education, in the presence of officials from Samagra Shiksha and the Finance Department.

NGTA Dimapur Unit president Alemkala asserted that the protesting teachers were regular appointees from the outset and had undergone a transparent recruitment process.

"We are not backdoor appointees. We went through written examinations and viva voce and were selected on merit. For more than 13 years, we have been fighting to be treated at par with other state cadre teachers. Our salary component should be shifted from CSS to the state non-plan budget," Alemkala said.

NGTA Central Unit president Peil-hau Irangbe added that the state cabinet had, in principle, decided in October 2018 to induct the 2,293 teachers into the

State Education Cadre. After fulfilling the necessary criteria, they were formally integrated with effect from April 1, 2022. Irangbe alleged that remaining under CSS funding has practical consequences for teachers. "The department often cites delays in the release of central funds, due to which our salaries are sometimes delayed for months. The posts advertised were regular departmental posts, but 'under CSS scheme' was later inserted in our appointment letters. This is why we demand that our salaries be shifted to the state non-plan head without further delay," he said.

With the protest now indefinite, the agitation threatens to impact academic functioning if the deadlock persists. While the department has maintained that the teachers are already mainstreamed in terms of pay scale and service rules, the budget head issue has emerged as a key point of contention.

As negotiations remain inconclusive, the coming days are likely to determine whether the state government intervenes to address the demand or whether the standoff deepens in Nagaland's education sector.

Justice Balbir Singh Chauhan appointed chairperson of Manipur violence inquiry panel

NEW DELHI

The Centre has appointed former Supreme Court judge Balbir Singh Chauhan as the new chairperson of the Commission of Inquiry probing the ethnic violence in Manipur, according to a government notification issued on February 26.

The appointment comes following the resignation of Ajai Lamba, who had been heading the panel since its inception. Justice Lamba's resignation will take effect on February 28. Justice Chauhan is set to assume charge of the commission from March 1, as per a notification issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs and published in the official gazette.

The Commission of Inquiry was constituted by the Centre on June 4, 2023, on the recommendation of the Manipur government to examine what it described as a matter of "definite public importance." The panel was initially headed by Justice Lamba, former Chief Justice of the Gauhati



High Court.

The commission has been mandated to investigate the sequence of events leading to the outbreak of ethnic violence in the state, assess the circumstances surrounding the unrest, and determine whether there were lapses or dereliction of duty on the part of any authority or individual. Its terms of reference also include evaluating the adequacy of administrative measures taken to prevent and respond to the violence and examining complaints and allegations submitted by individuals or organisations in connection with the incidents.

Ethnic violence in Manipur erupted on May 3, 2023, following a 'Tribal Solidarity March' organised in the hill districts to oppose the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe status. The unrest spiralled into

widespread clashes between communities, leading to the loss of more than 260 lives and triggering large-scale displacement. Thousands were rendered homeless, and extensive damage was reported to homes, places of worship and public infrastructure.

The violence was preceded by heightened tensions over the eviction of Kuki villagers from reserve forest land, which had sparked sporadic protests and confrontations before escalating into a prolonged and devastating conflict.

With Justice Chauhan's appointment, the Centre has signalled continuity in the inquiry process at a time when the commission continues to examine one of the gravest episodes of ethnic unrest in the state's recent history. Officials indicated that the change in leadership would not affect the functioning or mandate of the panel, which remains tasked with submitting its findings and recommendations after completing its investigation.

Northeast can emerge as key Southeast Asia trade corridor: Jitendra Singh

AGARTALA

Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Science and Technology Jitendra Singh on Wednesday said the Northeast holds immense potential to evolve into a vital trade corridor linking India with Southeast Asia, highlighting Tripura's strategic role in boosting regional connectivity and cross-border commerce. During his visit to Tripura, Dr Singh chaired a District-Level Review Meeting at the Sepahijala district collectorate in Kamalasaagar, where he urged officials to harness the state's abundant bamboo resources in a structured and commercially viable manner. Emphasising Tripura's rich bamboo reserves, the Minister said the resource remains largely under-utilised despite its wide-ranging applications in construction, interior décor, handicrafts, furniture, jewellery and sustainable building materials.

"With expanded value addition and better market access, bamboo-based industries can significantly enhance Tripura's trade capacity while generating sustainable livelihoods," he said, adding that organised processing and

branding could position the state as a leading supplier in domestic and international markets. The Minister underlined that strengthening such local industries would complement the broader vision of transforming the Northeast into a hub of trade, innovation and sustainable growth. Referring to cross-border connectivity initiatives, Dr Singh said the commencement of train services between Tripura and Bangladesh would make trade more cost-effective and accessible.

He recalled that work on the rail link connecting Tripura to Bangladesh had begun during his tenure as Governor and that the project has already received approval. However, he noted that progress has slowed due to the prevailing situation in Bangladesh. "Once direct train services begin, Tripura - and by extension the entire Northeast - will open up as an important South Asian corridor for trade and business," he said.

Improved rail connectivity is expected to reduce transportation costs, enhance export potential and integrate the landlocked Northeastern states more closely with Southeast Asian markets under India's Act East policy framework.

Manipuri actor Athokpam Gokulchandra granted interim bail in alleged wife assault case

IMPHAL

A local court has granted interim pre-arrest bail to Manipuri film actor Athokpam Gokulchandra, popularly known as Gokul, following the registration of an FIR alleging physical assault on his wife, actor Athokpam Ongbi Sonia.

The FIR was lodged by Sonia's father, Wanglebam Gunajit, at the women's police station in Imphal West district. In the complaint, he alleged that his daughter was assaulted by her husband after a heated argument following a birthday party.

According to reports, the alleged incident took place on February 17 at Gokulchandra's residence in Langging Achouba under Imphal West district, where he resides with his wife and children.

The FIR states that Sonia was admitted twice this month to Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences (JNIMS) Hospital, a state-run medical facility. It further claims that she later underwent psychiatric treatment due to trauma. She is currently staying at her father's residence.

Following due procedure, police submitted a report before the Court of Judicial Magistrate First Class I on February 23 for further action.

Anticipating possible arrest in connection with the FIR, Gokulchandra moved an anticipatory bail application before the Sessions Judge of Imphal West through his counsel.

After hearing submissions and examining the application, the court granted interim pre-arrest bail to the actor. The court has directed the Imphal West women's police station to file its objection report by March 10.

Further proceedings in the case are expected after the submission of the police report.

Gauhati HC issues notice to Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma over alleged 'hate speeches'

GUWAHATI

The Gauhati High Court on Thursday issued a notice to Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma in response to multiple petitions seeking action against him over alleged hate speeches targeting the Muslim community.

A Division Bench comprising Chief Justice Ashutosh Kumar and Justice Arun Dev Choudhury heard arguments in the matter and directed that notices be served to the Chief Minister as well as to the Central and Assam governments. The next hearing has been scheduled for April.

Senior Advocate CU Singh, appearing for some of the petitioners, alleged that the Chief Minister had made targeted remarks against "Miya" Muslims in Assam. He referred to statements in which Sarma allegedly suggested restricting voting rights of members of the community and indicated plans to alter voter lists. During the hearing, the court observed that the statements cited in the petitions appeared to reflect a possible "fissiparous tendency," but clarified that it would examine all submissions in detail before arriving at any conclusion.

The petitions cite multiple incidents, including a January 27 speech in which Sarma allegedly claimed that several lakh "Miya" voters would be removed from electoral rolls. The plea also refers to a February 7 video circulated by the BJP's Assam unit

that reportedly showed the Chief Minister aiming at animated images representing Muslim men, accompanied by captions such as "Point blank shot" and "No Mercy."

The petitions were filed by the Indian National Congress, Assamese scholar Hiren Gohain, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and others. The petitioners approached the High Court after the Supreme Court of India directed them to first seek relief before the jurisdictional High Court. Senior Advocate Abhishek Manu Singhvi argued that the Chief Minister's repeated statements demonstrated a pattern of incitement inconsistent with his constitutional responsibilities. He submitted that even though the controversial video was later taken down, it had already garnered over a million views. Senior Advocate Meenakshi Arora also appeared for the petitioners, contending that the statements reflected a sustained pattern of remarks against a particular community. She cited instances in which the Chief Minister allegedly discouraged students from enrolling in institutions founded by members of minority communities, linking such choices to floods or other adverse events in the state.

The petitioners have argued that the alleged remarks violate constitutional principles, including secularism and equality, and could have implications for law and order.



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ORANGE REVOLUTION

For decades, India's economic script revolved around steel, silicon and seeds. We measured our progress by the length of our highways, tonnage of our wheat and volume of our software exports. But the 2026-27 Union Budget signals a new hue in India's growth imagination: the 'orange economy'. Coined by the Inter-American Development Bank, the term refers to industries where creativity, culture and intellectual property generate economic value.

In her Budget speech, Nirmala Sitharaman did more than celebrate culture as soft power; she positioned it as hard economics. With India's media and entertainment sector valued at \$2.87 trillion (\$35 billion) in 2026, storytelling is fast becoming a strategic asset class.

India's services sector has long been a high-growth anchor, but the traditional IT and business process management model is maturing. Sustaining 7-8 percent GDP growth requires a new frontier. The creative economy—already estimated to contribute roughly 8 percent of India's workforce, compared to 2.1 percent in Australia and 1.9 percent in South Korea—may well be it.

The Budget's focus on the sector comprising animation, visual effects (VFX), gaming, comics and extended reality acknowledges how the digital generation earns. A VFX artist in Pune or a game designer in Hyderabad now matters as much to exports as a coder in Bengaluru. Creative services exports rose 20 percent last fiscal, diversifying foreign exchange earnings beyond maintenance and support work. Further, the projection that the sector will require 20 lakh professionals by 2030 has to be read for what it truly is—less of a statistic and more a skilling mandate.

To meet this demand, the government is backing the Indian Institute of Creative Technologies in Mumbai to spearhead a radical educational overhaul. The plan to set up 15,000 content creator labs in secondary schools and 500 labs in colleges is a 'Silicon Valley moment' for the arts. By embedding digital storytelling, character design and AI-assisted animation alongside mathematics and physics, the State is legitimising creativity as a mainstream career.

This move democratises opportunity. In the orange economy, it is not geography that matters. With subsidised graphics processing unit access under the IndiaAI Mission at \$65 per hour, a student in a tier-3 town can compete with a worker in a California studio.

While cinema historically served as India's primary cultural export, the gaming sector has emerged as a significant economic pillar within digital services. According to government data, India's online gaming market was valued at \$23,200 crore in 2024 and is projected to reach \$31,600 crore by 2027. This trajectory positions gaming as a core driver of the digital creative ecosystem, supported by a user base of nearly 50 crore participants in both urban and rural centres.

The 'Create and India' push aims to shift the country from consumer to creator. For years, Indian gamers played on platforms built in the West, Japan or China. By incentivising domestic development and enabling IP-backed lending, the government is encouraging developers to mine Indian mythology and contemporary narratives for global audiences. The prize is ownership of IP, not just participation in value chains.

However, the economist's lens must also be critical. While the orange economy offers high-paying jobs, with creative roles reportedly paying 88 percent more than non-creative ones, there is a risk of a widening divide. The K-shaped recovery, that has haunted post-pandemic India, persists. The creative boom is currently concentrated in urban clusters. The challenge lies in being inclusive. The orange economy must cover the handloom weaver in Kanchipuram as much as the digital animator in Mumbai.

Generative AI adds urgency. It can lower the cost of production by 40 percent, but also threatens entry-level jobs in dubbing, basic illustration and coding. The government's emphasis on 'trusted AI' and the proposed consensus on copyright is a step in the right direction. For the orange economy to thrive, the creator must be protected. If AI models can 'scrape' an artist's style without compensation, the incentive to create vanishes. Without enforceable IP protection, incentives to create will erode.

Despite the optimism, structural hurdles remain such as funding gaps, regulatory maze and a lack of physical infrastructure. Creative smaller enterprises struggle for credit because banks don't know how to value a script or a game design as collateral. We need a 'creative bank' or a specialised IP-valuation framework.

From gaming classifications to OTT censorship, the regulatory environment is often reactive. A single-window clearance for live events and a cohesive national policy for the creative audiovisual sector are overdue. Finally, digital labs are great, but the orange economy also thrives on 'collisions'. We need creative districts—physical spaces where artists, technologists and investors can meet and exchange ideas.

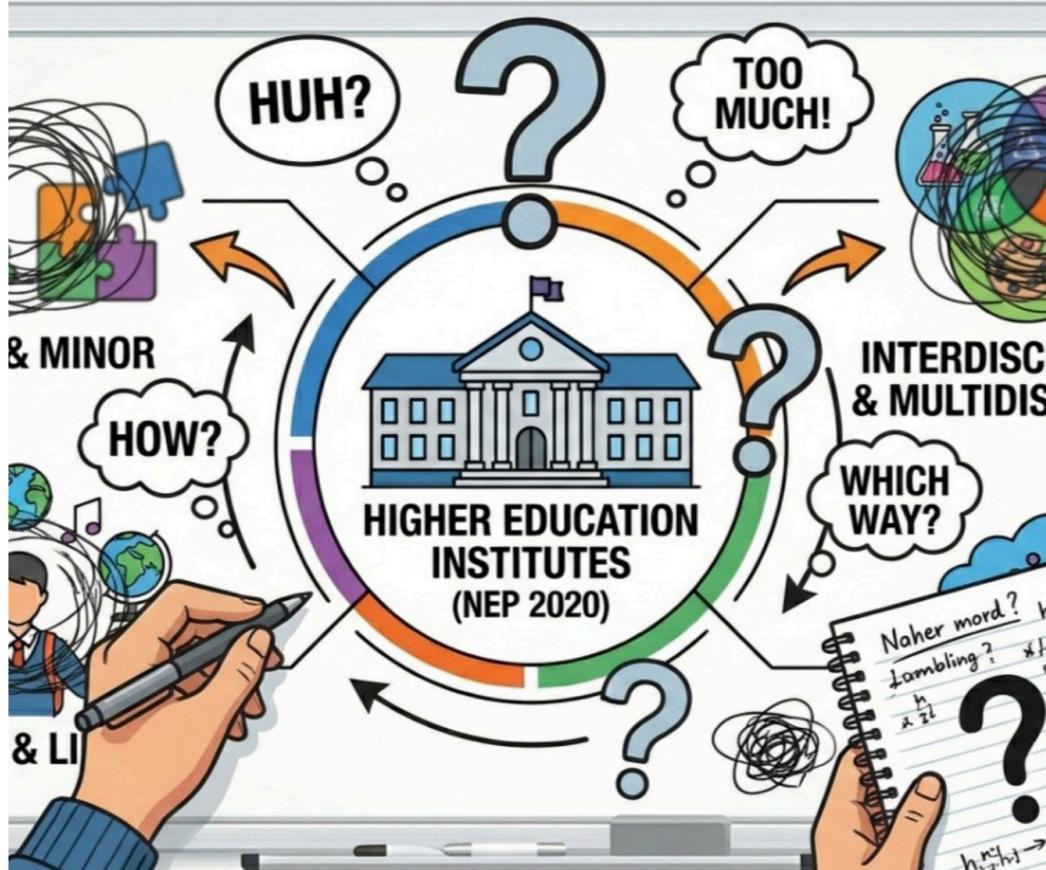
The significance of the orange economy transcends GDP percentages. It is about identity. When a nation exports its imagination, it stops competing on the basis of low-cost labour and starts leading on the basis of ideas. The Budget has sketched the outline. It is the execution which will now determine whether India evolves from the world's 'back office' to its 'creative studio', or stays put. If it succeeds, 'Made in India' will give way to something more powerful: 'Imagined in India'. It's time we put our money where our mind is.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"Care about what other people think and you will always be their prisoner."

-Lao Tzu

A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR NEP



GANESAN KANNABIRAN

The Indian higher education system has a crucial role in achieving the much-needed twin goals of economic prosperity and socio-cultural development. It is not new for India to lead the world in such outcomes. After all, Bharat's ancient higher education centres such as Nalanda, Takshashila and Vikramshila were the forebears of modern universities.

The focus on holistic, scientific and value education made these universities global centres of learning. There was a well-knit link between education and economic prosperity, eventually leading to socio-cultural development. However, the Indian education system had drifted in recent centuries from those lofty earlier goals.

Today, when India is poised to become the third largest economy, the need to link higher education with socio-cultural development has come back on the government's agenda. The National Education Policy 2020 offers the ingredients for transforming higher education and achieving the milestone of a Viksit Bharat by 2047, while leveraging the aspirational youth of the country. At the same time, it promises to take Indian higher education beyond the national requirements, restoring Bharat's role as a 'Vishwaguru'. Thus, NEP 2020 has a pivotal role in linking our glorious past with the promising future envisioned by the Prime Minister.

At the time of independence, India had about 20 universities and 500 colleges. Today, it has one of the largest higher education systems with about 1,170 universities and more than 50,000 colleges focusing on teaching and research in almost all fields.

Yet, India's relatively low gross enrolment ratio (GER) has been identified as a challenge, especially when the country is bestowed with a large youth population. Even the proposed increase in GER from the present 28 percent to 50 percent by 2035 may be inadequate for the country with a growing young population. Moreover, increasing GER in itself will not be a solution, given the current challenges of not being able to produce employable graduates.

Several reports indicate the employability of the graduates is far below the required levels and an increased GER will turn out to be more of a challenge than an opportunity. Therefore, the quality of education offered to the students by providing knowledge along with a variety of skills shall not only make them employable, but also enable them to get mainstreamed into society. Higher education institutions have a growing role in promoting research and innovation to enable industrialisation through technology transfers.

India increasingly needs more 'job givers' than 'job seekers'—a goal that can be achieved through innovation and a buzzing startup ecosystem, especially given the target of 50 percent GER. In addition, promoting Indian knowledge systems, cultural development, value education, and engaging with the community have significant roles in the overall development of the nation.

Thus, NEP 2020 focuses on the ambidextrous goals of increasing GER along with its underpinning require-

ments, while simultaneously improving the quality of education, research and societal engagement.

The broader vision of higher education for a Viksit Bharat demands a progressive governance model. Configuring a nationwide governance model to ensure access, equity and inclusion, as well as the quality of higher education is of paramount importance. It involves developing a unified approach for transforming higher educational institutions into large multi-disciplinary education and research institutions, promoting India as an education destination, and integration and promotion of Bharatiya knowledge.

The absence of an appropriate governance model has limited the scope for leveraging the full potential of NEP 2020 and achieving success in the last five years.

The recently-introduced Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Bill proposes three new councils: a Regulatory Council to combine the regulatory aspects of all programmes of study, an Accreditation Council to govern quality assurance and ranking of institutions and programmes, and a Standards Council to maintain academic standards. The Bill primarily focuses on unification, harmony and autonomy, the very basic governance aspects required for the progressive higher education envisioned in NEP 2020.

The higher-education system is poised to become more multi-disciplinary in the near future. Universities are required to increase programmes to provide learners with opportunities for multi-disciplinary education and research. Now, a relatively large institution has to deal with multiple agencies for approval, extension and increase in intake. For example, it was an excellent idea to start the Integrated Teacher Education Programme to train the teachers along with specialisation in a particular discipline. An institution that wants to introduce the programme has to deal with the National Council for Teacher Education to meet the requirements of just one additional programme. The unification of three agencies into a single one offers standardisation of procedures, making the system robust and responsive to the emerging context. It also helps to optimise the resources used by the three agencies. While these entities are brought together, there is a need to group similar activities performed by the three agencies. As per global practices, it is not desirable to have a single entity dealing with regulation, standards and accreditation. Separation of these functions will ensure that the objectives of the individual entities are achieved effectively. Further, such separation through councils will promote specialisation by drawing on best practices from the rest of the world. In the case of accreditation, its separation from other two functions are all the more important for assuring quality to the stakeholders.

Regulation and standards are focused on the institutional processes, resources, plans and actions. Globally, accreditation is normally kept outside the purview of regulation and standards for the very reason that it is focused on the outcome of the stakeholders such as students,

industry and community. Adopting best practices from some of the leading countries in this field, the Accreditation Council will oversee the functioning of the independent ecosystem of accreditation that is assessing the quality of the institutions.

The three councils are expected to work autonomously, taking into consideration the expected objectives. However, based on the need for understanding ongoing common and mutual requirements, the Bill has ensured that VBSA shall have the presidents of the councils as its members, thus ensuring harmony.

There is an ongoing debate on centralisation of higher education governance by the government. The proposed recentralised governance is an approach to deal with the problem by combining the best of both centralisation and decentralisation. Recentralisation is not about retaining the complex and rigid structure that existed for decades. But it advocates a decentralised governance model where independent councils operate autonomously to achieve common goals through the central commission.

The proposed higher education governance model shall not only make entities lean and agile, but also promises to be effective in delivering value to the stakeholders.

The new Bill is a timely and vital reform as part of NEP 2020 to realign the Indian higher education system with the demands of a progressive economy and an aspirational society. The proposed 'light but tight' approach of the VBSA shall separate functions to eliminate regulatory overlap and promote trust-based governance. It is expected to transform higher education by providing an effective, enabling and responsive system of regulation to encourage integrity, excellence and public-spiritiveness in higher education.

The nation requires a talent pool of students to help the country in achieving the vision of Viksit Bharat through outcome-based learning. The new Bill is expected to facilitate the students by providing opportunities for inter-disciplinary and flexible education with scope for re-skilling and up-skilling. It will also enable norms for credit transfers, equivalence and other related matters to facilitate mobility of students.

In addition, the public disclosure mandate related to infrastructure and facilities, faculty, fees and others by institutions will ensure availability of resources commensurate with the fees paid by them. It also ensures students with free access to a fair, transparent and robust grievance redress mechanism. Wherever required, the penalties proposed under the Bill will ensure students' interests are not affected or cause any monetary consequences. Therefore, VBSA is poised to promote enhanced student experiences. The empowered multidisciplinary higher educational institutions will be expected to have institutional development plans covering educational, research and societal goals, while maintaining compliance with national standards and regulations. The plan also includes initiatives, resource allocation and timelines for institutional development. Transparency of institutional information and activities are one of

the major challenges in today's higher education system. The proposed autonomy comes with the responsibility of public self-disclosure of all finances, audits, procedures, infrastructure, faculty, courses and educational outcomes. Online portals enable transparency to all stakeholders.

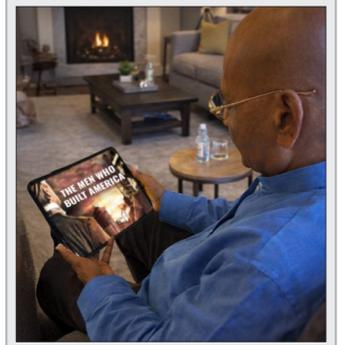
The federated structure of the commission and the council with members from diverse backgrounds is the uniqueness of the Bill. The new commission and the verticals require representation from the states through memberships. In addition, there are representatives from state universities. There are no such inclusive arrangements in the existing regulating bodies. Once it becomes law, the commission and the councils will act through consultative processes to make the transition to a new model of cooperative governance.

The new accreditation system re-

DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

Who built America? You will be surprised - no politician, scientist or intellectual. History Channel has an amazing series on this topic in which they have chosen just entrepreneurs. Five among thousands. Cornelius Vanderbilt, Andrew Carnegie, John Rockefeller, JP Morgan and Henry Ford. These five gentlemen built the fundamental, core industries - infrastructure, steel, oil, banking and automobiles respectively. These entrepreneurs also founded philanthropy as we know it today. Most of them gave away a majority of their wealth to society in their lifetime. One reason for America's greatness today is its university system. It is the hub of thinking and innovation. Much of it, almost all the top 40, was built by private philanthropy. In fact, some of the best libraries, think tanks and hospitals in America were also built by the wealth entrepreneurs gave back. Not just these five, but thousands of them. All of them also fulfilled their responsibility towards their children by supporting their passion. Some stayed in the business, others exited. Eventually, the businesses became institutions and survive and thrive to this day. All their ventures were treated as national assets, not family silver. American capitalism is vibrant, dynamic and has wide social acceptance because of these incredible entrepreneurs. They did something different. India shares some of its DNA with the US. It is a large country with a tradition of entrepreneurship and blessed with tremendous natural resources and human resources. Who will build that India? We must encourage our entrepreneurs, trust them, give them respect and dignity. They will build assets, harness natural resources, create jobs, contribute revenue and accelerate India's rise. Let us not distract them with processes. Allow self-certification and let them focus all their energies productively, building their business. I have no doubt that we can do even better than America. Our natural resources and human resources are tremendous. The power and potential of our women is unparalleled. I am confident that dynamic entrepreneurship with a philanthropic mindset, facilitated by Government and appreciated by society is what will make India the number one country in the world. If this won't happen in the time of Modi government, which is recognised by the world for its dynamism, then when will it happen?

- Anil Agarwal, Chairman - Vedanta Group



volves around granting autonomy to the institutions. It requires that all higher educational institutions attain full accreditation and autonomy in a graded manner. Such graded autonomy will further empower the higher education sector. The outcomes created for the students, industry and community by these autonomous institutions will be a cornerstone of the transformation. The Accreditation Council will develop an outcome- and impact-based institutional framework in consultation with stakeholders to assess institutions. Thus, quality assurance to stakeholders through accreditation outcomes will be made compulsory, which presently a large number of institutions have ignored.

As envisaged in NEP 2020, a robust ecosystem for research is perhaps more important than ever due to advances in technologies. Under the VBSA Bill, institutions are expected to focus on research and innovation by setting up centres for startup incubation and technology transfer in frontier areas through industry-academic linkages. Also, participation in community service programmes will be considered an integral part of holistic education.

In sum, the VBSA Bill as the life-line of NEP 2020 is set to transform Indian higher education with public-spirited autonomous institutions.

Tripura to launch India's first state AI policy; Agartala set for AI-driven smart solutions

AGARTALA

Tripura will introduce what it describes as India's first State Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy, Chief Minister Manik Saha announced on Thursday, outlining plans to deploy AI-based smart solutions in Agartala to improve urban governance and public service delivery.

The policy is being developed with support from the Atal Innovation Mission and NITI Aayog, as part of efforts to build a robust innovation ecosystem in the state.

The announcement was made at the launch of the Tripura State Innovation Mission at the International Exhibition Centre in Hapania, in the presence of Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Science and Technology Jitendra Singh.

Saha said AI-driven systems will be introduced in Agartala to enhance traffic management, parking systems, power distribution,



drinking water supply, flood control, waste management and property assessment.

He stated that leading technology firms have expressed interest in partnering with the state for implementation.

The proposed AI policy will provide a structured framework for the adoption of artificial intelligence across governance, infrastructure and service delivery sectors, with a focus on efficiency, transparency and data-driven decision-making.

Describing the Tripura State Innovation Mission as a first-of-its-kind initiative at the state level, Saha said the government has prioritised administrative reforms, digital governance and startup-friendly policies.

According to the Chief Minister, Tripura is the only state where official functioning - from the Cabinet and Secretariat to village councils and Gram Panchayats - is fully paperless.

The initiative falls under NITI Aayog's State Support Mission, which aims to help states strengthen local innovation ecosystems. With backing from the Atal Innovation Mission, the programme seeks to promote entrepreneurship, encourage the use of advanced technologies and translate ideas into viable enterprises.

The Tripura Institution for Transformation and the Department of Information Technology have collaborated with premier institutions including Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, Indian Institute of Management Bangalore and T-Hub to establish the State Innovation Mission and T-NEST platform.

Saha said the mission will support enterprises in sectors such as agriculture, green technology, digital services, tourism and healthcare, positioning Tripura as a potential

innovation hub in the Northeast.

The Chief Minister also announced plans to establish a Tripura AI Centre of Excellence with assistance from the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology.

Additionally, the state government is proposing a Tripura IT and Data Economic Zone and an IT park with co-working spaces to strengthen the IT, IT-enabled services and data centre ecosystem.

Officials said these initiatives are aimed at attracting technology investments, creating employment opportunities and integrating Tripura more closely with India's expanding digital economy.

With the rollout of the AI policy and innovation mission, the state government has signalled its intent to leverage emerging technologies to drive governance reforms and economic growth in the region.

Assam CM announces Rs 40,000 one-time aid for specially-abled PhD scholars

GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday, February 26, announced a series of initiatives aimed at strengthening higher education and promoting inclusive academic support, including a one-time financial assistance of Rs 40,000 for specially-abled PhD scholars in the state. The announcement was made during a press briefing after the launch of the 'Mukhyamantrir Nijut Babu Achari' at the Jyoti-Bishnu International Auditorium. Under the Mukhyamantrir Nijut Babu Achari scheme, postgraduate students will receive Rs 2,000 per month for 10 months in a year, while undergraduate students will be provided Rs 1,000 per month for 10 months annually. The scheme will be applicable to students whose annual family income is below Rs 4 lakh. Students in their second and third years of graduation will also be eligible for the benefits. The Chief Minister also launched the 'Jeevan Prerana Achari' to extend support to graduates and research scholars. As part of this initiative, 48,319 students who graduated in 2025 will receive Rs 2,500 per month. Research scholars enrolled in state and central universities in Assam after April 1, 2021, will be eligible for financial assistance of Rs 25,000. A total of 2,112 research scholars are expected to benefit from the scheme. Among them, 13 specially-abled researchers will receive enhanced one-time assistance of Rs 40,000 each, in a move aimed at encouraging differently-abled students to pursue advanced research and academic careers.

In addition to the student welfare schemes, Sarma virtually inaugurated technology centres under the 'Udyog 4.0' initiative. He announced that 34 new technology centres have been established across 34 Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and polytechnic institutes in Assam, with an overall investment of around Rs 3,000 crore.

Assam faces 70% rainfall deficit since Nov, 99% since Jan; crops, tea at risk

GUWAHATI

Assam is grappling with a severe rainfall deficit, recording over 70 per cent shortfall since November and an alarming 99 per cent deficit since January 1, raising concerns over rabi crops, tea production and fruit flowering amid mounting climate change signals.

According to data from the India Meteorological Department (IMD), the state received just 0.4 mm of rainfall against the normal 39 mm since January 1. As many as 25 districts have recorded no rainfall at all during this period, while the remaining districts have reported deficits exceeding 90 per cent. The dry spell has effectively persisted since the second week of November 2025. In Guwahati, rainfall was recorded in the first week of November last year - around 27.5 mm - but precipitation ceased after November 6. The city received a meagre 0.2 mm on January 5, and barring that isolated event, has remained completely dry for nearly four months.

Meteorologists warn that such prolonged winter dryness is becoming

increasingly frequent, reinforcing concerns about shifting climatic patterns in the region.

The extended dry spell is already impacting agriculture.

Dr Rajib Lochan Deka, Head of the Department of Agricultural Meteorology at Assam Agricultural University, said rabi crops such as rapeseed, potato and maize have experienced significant moisture stress due to insufficient rainfall since early November.

"Rabi crops like rapeseed, potato and maize have experienced significant moisture stress due to insufficient rainfall since the first week of November. Lack of a sufficient number of cold days, along with the absence of rainfall, has resulted in reduced yields for these crops. Additionally, the duration of most field crops has been observed to decrease," he said.

The combination of warmer-than-normal temperatures and low soil moisture has affected crop growth cycles, potentially reducing overall productivity.

Assam expands higher education push with youth, research and skill support schemes

GUWAHATI

In a major push to strengthen higher education, research and employability, the Assam government on Thursday rolled out three flagship schemes aimed at supporting fresh graduates, research scholars and college students across the state.

The initiatives - Chief Minister's Jibon Prerana, Jibon Anuprerana and Nijut Babu Achari - were launched during a ceremonial Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) programme at the Jyoti Bishnu Antarjati Kala Mandir auditorium in Khanapara.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said the schemes are designed to ease the transition from education to employment, promote research and innovation, and expand access to higher education for all sections of students.

Announcing the Nijut Babu Achari, Sarma said the scheme seeks to address the financial support gap for male students.

While the Nijut Moina scheme has already boosted enrolment among girl students, the new initia-

tive aims to encourage boys to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate education.

Under Nijut Babu Achari, undergraduate students will receive approximately Rs 10,000 annually, while postgraduate students will get around Rs 20,000 annually. Eligible first-year students must apply through the Samartha portal as per guidelines issued by the Higher Education Department. Continued assistance will depend on regular attendance and academic discipline.

"The Nijut Moina Achari has helped more than 50,000 girl students enrol in colleges. Now we want to ensure that boys also receive support so that higher education becomes accessible to all," the Chief Minister said.

Under the Jibon Prerana scheme, 48,319 fresh graduates from public institutions have been selected to receive Rs 2,500 per month for 12 months through DBT. The assistance is intended to help them upgrade skills, prepare for competitive examinations, pursue higher studies or explore entrepreneurial ventures. Skill,

Employment and Entrepreneurship Minister Prashanta Phukan said the scheme aims to build confidence among young graduates navigating a competitive job market. "Every beneficiary will receive Rs 2,500 per month for one year directly in their bank accounts. So far, 48,319 students have been selected under this initiative," he said.

Sarma noted that limited vacancies in traditional sectors have left many graduates struggling to secure employment.

"Through Jibon Prerana, we are supporting them for one year so that they can learn new skills and become industry-ready," he added. The research-oriented Jibon Anuprerana scheme will provide monthly financial support to 2,112 research scholars, including 13 differently-abled scholars. Eligible PhD scholars will receive Rs 25,000 per month, while differently-abled researchers will be entitled to Rs 40,000 per month.

"This initiative recognises the dedication of young researchers and encourages them to pursue innova-

tion and new discoveries," Phukan said.

Education Minister Ranoo Pegu described the initiatives as part of a holistic education policy.

"We are supporting students at every stage - from matriculation preparation to research. Through Jibon Prerana, Anuprerana and Nijut Babu Achari, we want to create a culture of learning, research and innovation," he said.

The state government also virtually inaugurated new Industry 4.0 technology centres and Centres of Excellence (CoEs) in ITIs and polytechnics across Assam in collaboration with Tata Technologies.

These centres aim to modernise technical education and introduce advanced manufacturing, robotics and automation training. CoEs are being set up in 43 government ITIs and 34 polytechnics to upgrade workshops and align training with industry requirements. So far, centres in three ITIs and three polytechnics have become operational, with additional facilities expected by June 2026.

Final rites of Vungzagin Valte on hold as tribal bodies renew separate administration demand

IMPHAL

Five days after the death of Manipur BJP legislator Vungzagin Valte, his final rites remain on hold in Churachandpur district, with tribal organisations indicating that the burial will not proceed immediately amid renewed demands for separate administration in the hill areas.

Valte, the MLA from 56th Thanlon constituency, passed away at a private hospital in Gurugram earlier this week. His mortal remains were brought back to the Northeast and shifted to the Churachandpur district morgue on Wednesday afternoon. An autopsy is scheduled to be conducted, officials confirmed.

However, even after the post-mortem, the burial has been delayed. A functionary of a Zomi civil organisation said that recent political developments have prompted community leaders to reconsider the timing of the final rites.



"In view of the recent developments, our demand for separate administration remains key before anything proceeds further. Meetings will be held with tribal civil bodies to decide the next course of action," the functionary said.

On Wednesday night, several tribal organisations held a candlelight vigil in Churachandpur, reiterating their long-standing demand for a Union Territory with legislature for the hill districts of Manipur. Demonstrators raised slogans seeking justice and called for a credible

investigation into the May 4, 2023 attack on Valte, which had left him critically injured.

Protesters demanded that the probe be handed over either to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) or the National Investigation Agency (NIA), arguing that an independent inquiry was essential to ensure accountability.

Valte's mortal remains were airlifted to Mizoram on February 22 before being brought to his residence in Churachandpur district on February 24. At the Tuivai river bridge, community leaders and supporters formally received the cortege.

Ajay Kumar Bhalla, Governor of Manipur, paid his last respects at the legislator's residence, laying a wreath and draping the body with a traditional shawl.

Meanwhile, the Zomi Council - the apex body of the Zomi tribe in the

district - has stated that it will determine the course of action regarding the burial after consultations with civil society organisations.

Family members of the late MLA are also understood to be in discussions with community leaders, as the delay in conducting the funeral adds a fresh political dimension to the situation.

Tribal groups have linked the burial to broader demands for separate administration for the hill areas and a credible probe into the 2023 attack, signalling that the issue has moved beyond personal mourning to a larger political assertion in the conflict-scarred state.

The unfolding developments underscore the continuing sensitivities in Manipur's hill districts, where the death of a senior legislator has once again brought governance and justice-related demands to the fore.

Nagaland inks 20-year pact with IMD for Doppler Weather Radar at Dimapur

KOHIMA

The Nagaland government has signed a 20-year Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the India Meteorological Department (IMD) to strengthen weather forecasting, agrometeorological services and atmospheric research in the state.

The agreement, signed on February 26 by the Department of Higher Education, provides for the installation of an X-Band Polarimetric Doppler Weather Radar (DWR) at Dimapur Government College under the Centre's Mission Mausam scheme. Officials said the initiative is aimed at significantly enhancing the state's capacity to generate precise and location-specific weather data.

According to an official statement, the Doppler radar system will improve short-term and nowcasting capabilities, enabling more accurate predictions of rainfall, thunderstorms and other severe weather events.

This is expected to bolster disaster preparedness, public safety and evidence-based policy planning, particularly in a hilly state like Nagaland that is prone to landslides and extreme rainfall events.

The collaboration is also set to strengthen agrometeorological advisory services for farmers, providing timely inputs that can help mitigate crop losses and improve productivity. Officials noted that improved forecasting accuracy would be crucial for agriculture-dependent communities across the state.

Beyond operational forecasting,

the MoU envisages institutional cooperation between the Department of Higher Education and IMD in the fields of urban meteorology and atmospheric sciences. The partnership will promote research, training and knowledge exchange programmes for faculty members and students in higher educational institutions across Nagaland.

The radar installation at Dimapur Government College is expected to serve as a research and data hub, facilitating advanced atmospheric studies and generating insights into weather-related hazards unique to the region.

Authorities said both institutions would jointly develop new applications and explore emerging areas of mutual interest in meteorological sciences.

The MoU will remain in force for 20 years from the date of signing, with provisions for amendments through mutual consultation between IMD and the Department of Higher Education.

The agreement was formalised at the Directorate of Higher Education in Kohima in the presence of Higher Education and Tourism Minister Temjen Imna Long, Secretary for Higher and Technical Education Sarita Yadav, Ex-officio Director of Higher Education V. Lovitoly Sema, senior officials of the department and representatives of IMD.

Officials expressed optimism that the long-term collaboration would place Nagaland on a stronger footing in weather monitoring and climate resilience, while also creating academic and research opportunities within the state.

'After I defeated Ajmal by 10 lakh votes, Himanta started hating me': Rakibul Hussain



BARPETA

Congress Member of Parliament Rakibul Hussain alleged that Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has been mounting sustained verbal

Quest!

You have a second brain in your gut, called the Enteric Nervous System. This is where the term 'gut feeling' comes from.

attacks against him ever since the Congress routed AIUDF chief Badaruddin Ajmal in the Dhubri Lok Sabha constituency by a massive margin.

Addressing the media, Hussain claimed that the political hostility began immediately after he defeated Ajmal by nearly 10 lakh votes. "Have you seen the verbal attacks on me by Himanta Biswa Sarma? I was good with him when we were together, but suddenly I became bad. Do you know from when? From the day I defeated

his friend Badaruddin Ajmal with a margin of 10 lakh votes," Hussain said.

The Congress MP alleged that the Chief Minister was unable to "digest" Ajmal's defeat and had since targeted him politically. "From that very day, he started attacking me. The way I defeated Badaruddin Ajmal, Himanta Biswa Sarma is unable to accept it," he said.

Hussain further claimed that the BJP's political calculations in Assam had shifted following resistance in Up-

per Assam from Moran, Matak and tea tribe communities. According to him, the Chief Minister may once again seek Ajmal's support in the run-up to the next Assembly elections.

"Now he has seen that the BJP's condition in Upper Assam is not good. There are no MLAs from tea tribes and no tea tribe ministers at the Centre. So Himanta Biswa Sarma thinks that to win elections, he will again require Badaruddin Ajmal," Hussain alleged.

In a sharper charge, the Congress leader claimed that Ajmal, who he described as being "inactive and staying in Mumbai and Dubai," had been called back into Assam's political scene ahead of the Assembly polls. "Badaruddin Ajmal is Himanta's old friend. I am not saying this - Himanta himself has admitted that wherever he asks Badaruddin Ajmal to field candidates, Ajmal does it," Hussain claimed.

Turning to the Samaguri Assembly constituency, Hussain alleged manipulation during the by-election. Referring to the seat, he said, "The voters of Samaguri are my own people. The by-election result happened due to rigging of votes by Himanta Biswa Sarma." He asserted that the Congress would reclaim the seat with a significant margin in the next election.

At the time of filing this report, the Assam government and the BJP had not issued a response to the allegations made by the Congress MP.

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Rahul Gandhi alleges Trump used 'Epstein files' to pressure PM Modi into US trade deal 'sacrificing' farmers

KANNUR

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Thursday alleged that US President Donald Trump had used the 'Epstein files' to threaten Prime Minister Narendra Modi into signing a trade deal that would "sacrifice" Indian farmers.

The Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha was speaking at a farmers' convention in Peravoor, Kannur district.

He said the simple fact that farmers are the foundation of India is not understood by the government. He said lengthy lectures were delivered about IT and other sectors, but nothing could be built without strengthening the foundation.

"If you do not respect the foundation, nothing can be built. The person who builds the foundation does not have respect or protection. We eat food every day but do not remember who puts it on our table," he said.

Gandhi alleged that the Prime Minister had signed a deal with the US President that was "like digging the foundation".

"Indian farmers are small farmers with low levels of mechanisation. American farmers have massive farms and high levels of mechanisation. It is a criminal act to allow access to Indian agriculture markets for American farmers," he said.

He claimed that no previous prime minister would have allowed American farmers to sell products such as soybeans, corn and fruits in India.

"It is going to destroy the foundation that we have built carefully. The whole Green and White Revolutions happened because we believed that we needed a foundation built in agriculture," he said.

Gandhi said the India-US deal had been stalled for four months due to disagreements over agriculture.

"The Indian government did not want to open agriculture to American companies. I checked with government officials multiple times. Nothing was moving, and the US President was threatening the Prime Minister," he alleged.

He further claimed that he was not allowed to speak in Parliament after the President's address because he intended to raise two issues that had trapped the Prime Minister of India.

"The first was about 3.5 million Epstein files that have not yet been released. Please understand they are held secret by the US government. These files have information about the Prime Minister of India," he alleged.

Gandhi said the information released about Union Minister Hardeep Puri and Anil Ambani is targeted at the Prime Minister of India.

"The second weapon held to the head of the Prime Minister of India is the Adani case in America. Adani is not a normal company. Adani is the financial infrastructure of the BJP and the Prime Minister of India," he claimed.

Gandhi said that the US has registered a case against Adani, and he cannot leave the country today.

"The threat to the Prime Minister is very clear. If you do not do what we want, we will release to everybody, your and the BJP's entire financial architecture," the Leader of Opposition said.

He said that these are the two reasons why the Prime Minister wants to destroy the foundation of India.

"Indian farmers are being sacrificed so that the Prime

Minister can protect himself and the financial foundation of the BJP," Gandhi alleged.

He said the Congress would not allow farmers of India and Kerala to be sacrificed.

Referring to Kerala, Gandhi said a manifesto was being prepared to incorporate public issues, and that any future UDF government should remember that its foundation lay with farmers and labourers.

"Instead of Kerala's farmers coming to the government with problems, the government should go to farmers as a service provider. Farmers need support prices, cold chains and storage facilities. They need protection in difficult times," he said.

Gandhi, a former MP from Wayanad, said he had witnessed the tragedy of man-animal conflict in the region and described it as a complex issue that could be resolved.

"The next government is going to look into this problem with sensitivity and with a technological mindset. We are going to assemble the best people to develop a solution for the problem. We will try our best to reduce this problem," he said.

Gandhi heard the concerns of various farmers and people who suffered from wild animal attacks during the convention.

Laisamma Alias, wife of ward-winning farmer Ambattu Alias, who died by suicide allegedly due to debt a few weeks ago, submitted a petition to Gandhi.

He also met Ambarish of Peravoor, a person with Down syndrome who farms vegetables.

KPCC president Sunny Joseph, KC Venugopal MP, K Sudakaran MP, AICC leader Deepa Dasmuni, Shafi Parambil MP and Sajeer Joseph MLA also attended the convention.

PM Modi and Netanyahu reaffirm their shared vision for robust India-Israel Special Strategic Partnership

NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu held a meeting in Jerusalem on Thursday, discussing bilateral cooperation in areas of technology and innovation, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and critical minerals, defence and security, trade and economy, labour mobility and education, blue economy, agriculture and health.

The two leaders also announced elevating ties to 'India-Israel Special Strategic Partnership for Peace, Innovation and Prosperity'.

External Affairs Minister (EAM) S Jaishankar, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval and other officials were also present during the meeting.

According to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), both countries also decided to elevate JCM on Science and Technology elevated to Ministerial level; launch an initiative to collaborate in Critical and Emerging Technologies led by National Security Advisors; have financial dialogue, launch tech-gateway initiative and 20 Joint Fellowships in Agricultural Research.

It was also decided to increase contribution of both sides for the Joint Research Calls; enhance quota of up to 50,000 Indian workers over the next five years, hold an India-Israel Academic Cooperation Forum and form an India-Israel Parliamentary Friendship Group.

"Towards a strengthened and more comprehensive partnership! PM Narendra Modi held extensive bilateral talks with PM Benjamin Netanyahu. Both leaders discussed the entire range of bilateral relationship. Discussions included areas of technology and innovation, AI and critical minerals, defence and security, trade and economy, labour mobility and education, blue economy, agriculture and health. They also discussed issues of regional and global interest," MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal wrote on X.

"In a significant development, both leaders announced elevating the relationship to India-Israel Special Strategic Partnership for Peace, Innovation and



Prosperity. Several outcomes were also finalised including in the areas of technology, science, trade, finance, AI, agriculture, blue economy, labour mobility, education and culture," he added.

The two sides exchanged several MoUs, including on co-operation in the field of geophysical exploration; for development of National Maritime Heritage Complex (NMHC) in Lothalat Gujarat; Cultural Exchange Programme for the period 2026-2029; between NPCI International (NIPI) and MASAV Israel on implementation of UPI; between ICAR and MASHAV on establishment of the India-Israel Innovation Centre for Agriculture (IINCA), etc.

India and Israel also signed a Declaration of Intent on cooperation in the field of Horizon Scanning; MoU on Cooperation in the field of Fisheries and Aquaculture; MoU between International Financial Services Centres Authority (IFSCA) and Israel Securities Authority (ISA);

Implementation Protocol on Labour Mobility in Commerce and Services Sector; Implementation Protocol on Labour Mobility in Manufacturing Sector; Implementation Protocol on Labour Mobility in Restaurant Sector; MoU on the Cooperation in advancing Education through the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI); Agreement on Cooperation between Israeli Institute of Commercial Arbitration (IICA) and Indian Council of Arbitration (ICA); MoU between Nalanda University and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (HUJI); Letter of Intent on establishment of Indo-Israel Cyber Centre of Excellence in India; and, MoU on cooperation in Artificial Intelligence (AI). Earlier in the day, PM Modi visited the Yad Vashem World Holocaust Remembrance Centre in Jerusalem and laid a wreath at the memorial in memory of the Holocaust victims. Prime Minister Modi was accompanied by Israeli PM Netanyahu and Yad Vashem Chairman Dani Dayan

as he visited the Holocaust Memorial and Museum which perpetuates and documents the Holocaust.

The visit included a tour of the Book of Names - a monumental installation containing the names of 4.8 million Jewish victims of the Holocaust - and a memorial ceremony in the Hall of Remembrance. Prime Minister Modi also signed the Yad Vashem guest book.

This was PM Modi's second visit to Yad Vashem, having also visited the memorial in July 2017 during his last visit to the country. Netanyahu had also accompanied PM Modi the last time he had toured the memorial in 2017. PM Modi is currently on a two-day State Visit to Israel. He was accorded a grand welcome by Netanyahu and his wife, Sara Netanyahu, in Tel Aviv on Wednesday. Later, he addressed a Special Plenary of the Knesset in Jerusalem - the first such address by an Indian Prime Minister at the Israeli parliament.

INTERNATIONAL

Weakened by war and protests, Iran could still inflict pain in response to a US attack

JERUSALEM

As US forces mass in the Middle East, Iran faces the threat of major strikes by the world's most powerful military, potentially targeting its leaders, military, nuclear sites and critical infrastructure.

Iran has nowhere near the same capabilities, and is even more vulnerable after last year's war launched by Israel and recent anti-government protests. But it could still inflict pain on American forces and allies, and may feel it has to if the Islamic Republic's survival is at stake.

While Iran suffered major losses last June, it still has hundreds of missiles capable of hitting Israel. While Iran suffered major losses last June, it still has hundreds of missiles capable of hitting Israel, according to Israel's estimates. Iran boasts a much larger arsenal of shorter-range missiles capable of hitting US bases in Gulf countries and offshore American forces, soon to be joined by a second aircraft carrier.

Iran has previously threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz, a vital waterway for the global oil trade, and claimed to have done so partially during military drills last week.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned that Iran could sink American warships, and top officials have said a US attack would spark regional war. Iran's UN ambassador Amir Saeid Iravani said "all bases, facilities and assets of the hostile force in the region" would be legitimate targets.

This image, provided Thursday, Feb. 19, 2026, by the Iranian military and dated Tuesday, Feb. 17, 2025, shows navy ships conducting operations during a joint drill by Iranian and Russian forces in the Indian Ocean.

Israel carried out heavy strikes on



Iran's longer range missile arsenals — as well as its military leadership and nuclear program — during the 12-day war in June. The US struck Iran's main nuclear sites, and President Donald Trump said at the time that they had been "obliterated."

But the extent of the damage — and how much has been rebuilt — is still unknown. Iran continued to strike Israel with missiles and drones until the fighting stopped, increasingly eluding its vaunted air defenses.

Iran's shorter-range missile arsenal was largely untouched, said Danny Citrinowicz, an Iran expert at Israel's Institute for National Security Studies. That could make Iran more inclined to retaliate against tens of thousands of US forces based in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and elsewhere.

"Iran may be weak. But it still has ways to inflict real pain on the United States — and much more incentive to try than it did before," Nate Swanson, head of the Atlantic Council's Iran

Strategy Project, wrote in Foreign Affairs. "Iranian officials feel they need to give Trump a bloody nose or they will perpetually be at risk."

Iran launched missiles at a US base in Iraq after the killing of its top general in 2020 and targeted a US base in Qatar near the end of last year's war. Those strikes, which appeared to have been telegraphed in advance, caused damage but no fatalities, as early warning systems and missile defenses swung into action.

Iran could also carry out attacks farther afield. The country has been accused of using criminal gangs and armed groups to plan or carry out attacks around the world, including on dissidents, Israelis and Jewish targets.

This image, provided Thursday, Feb. 19, 2026, by the Iranian military and dated Tuesday, Feb. 17, 2025, shows navy ships conducting operations during a joint drill by Iranian and Russian forces in the Indian Ocean.

Last year's Israeli strikes killed several top generals and nuclear scien-

tists, revealing major vulnerabilities. At one point, Trump said the US knew where Khamenei was hiding, calling him an "easy target."

Fresh off the capture of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro, Trump may consider decapitation strikes aimed at bringing down Iran's decades-old Shiite theocracy, which he recently said "would be the best thing that could happen."

The Iranians have had eight months to learn from their mistakes and firm up internal security. Citrinowicz said there are likely contingency plans if Khamenei were to be killed. Rather than naming a single successor, power would probably shift to a small committee until hostilities subsided.

Experts say the death of the 86-year-old Khamenei, who has ruled Iran for over three decades, would not in itself spell the end of the Islamic Republic. Power might eventually pass to a member of his inner circle, as it did in Venezuela, or to Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

North Korea's Kim Jong Un shuns South but says 'could get along' with US



SEOUL

Kim Jong Un said North Korea could "get along" with Washington if it accepted Pyongyang's nuclear status, state media said Thursday, but has dashed any hopes of mended ties with "deceptive" neighbour Seoul.

Washington and Seoul have mounted a renewed push for high-level talks with reclusive North Korea, eyeing a potential summit between Kim and US President Donald Trump in China later this year.

Having largely ignored these overtures for months, Kim finally staked his position as thousands gathered in Pyongyang for a rare congress of the ruling Workers' Party.

If Washington "respects our country's current (nuclear) status... and withdraws its hostile policy... there is no reason why we cannot get along well with the United States," Kim said, according to the Korean Central News Agency.

The United States has for decades led efforts to dismantle North Korea's nuclear programme — but summits, sanctions and diplomatic pressure have had little impact.

The last summit between Kim and Trump in 2019 unravelled as the leaders argued over sanctions relief and what nuclear concessions North Korea might make in return.

Trump is slated to travel to China — North Korea's longtime

ally — in late March through early April. Speculation is mounting he may seek to meet with Kim on the sidelines of this trip. A Trump-Kim meeting would be a major breakthrough after years of deadlocked diplomacy.

Trump stepped up his courtship of Kim during a tour of Asia last year, saying he was "100 percent" open to a meeting. He even bucked long-held US policy by conceding that North Korea was already "sort of a nuclear power."

North Korea's economy has for years languished under heavy Western sanctions that aim to choke off funding for its nuclear weapons programme.

Held just once every five years, the Workers' Party congress offers a rare glimpse into the workings of a nation where even mundane details are shrouded in secrecy.

Speaking as the days-long political spectacle drew to a close, Kim took a far more combative tone on South Korea. Seoul's recent efforts to lower the temperature with North Korea were a "clumsy deceptive farce and a poor work", Kim said.

North Korea has "absolutely no business dealing with South Korea, its most hostile entity, and will permanently exclude South Korea from the category of compatriots", Kim said. "As long as South Korea cannot escape the geopolitical conditions of having a border

with us, the only way to live safely is to give up everything related to us and leave us alone."

In response, Seoul vowed to keep working for peaceful coexistence.

"To achieve this, the two Koreas must refrain from hostile and confrontational words and actions and build a foundation of mutual respect and trust," the government said in a statement.

North Korea's latest announcements reflect the view that "South Korea's continued insistence on North Korea's denuclearisation — directed at the US and the international community — fundamentally infringes on Pyongyang's national interests," said Hong Min, an analyst at the Korea Institute for National Unification.

Kim's remarks "signal an intention to pursue relations with the US independently, without going through South Korea," Yang Moo-jin, former president of the University of North Korean Studies, told.

He was also making clear that he will "reject any negotiations premised on denuclearisation", Yang added.

The congress ended as thousands of soldiers marched through Pyongyang's Kim Il Sung Square in a grand military parade. Kim and his daughter Ju Ae donned matching leather jackets as they watched the procession, fuelling speculation the teenager is being groomed for power. "What we're seeing looks like deliberate image politics — projecting her as a potential inheritor of her father's authority," said Kyungnam University professor Lim Eul-chul.

Pyeongyang said a range of military units took part in the event, including troops who aided Russia's war effort in Ukraine and those stationed near the inter-Korean border.

Global Reckonings and Selective Silences: The Expanding Fallout of the Epstein Files

Few scandals in recent history have so persistently unsettled corridors of power as the disclosures collectively known as the Epstein Files. What began as court proceedings linked to a disgraced financier has evolved into a sprawling, multinational reckoning—an uncomfortable audit of how influence, privilege and access intersected for years around a man already convicted of sexual crimes.

The archive, drawn from civil litigation, federal investigations and subsequent transparency mandates, spans millions of pages of documents, images and recordings. These materials—released in phases from 2019 through 2026—include emails, flight manifests, calendars, depositions, FBI memoranda and personal correspondence. Together, they illuminate the social and professional orbit of Jeffrey Epstein, the American financier whose 2008 guilty plea for procuring a minor for prostitution resulted in a widely criticised plea deal and a 13-month sentence, and whose death in custody in 2019 intensified public suspicion rather than ending scrutiny.

Crucially, the files do not constitute a definitive ledger of criminality. Legal analysts and investigative journalists have consistently underscored a vital distinction: the appearance of a name in correspondence or on a guest list does not equate to participation in criminal conduct. Some references are fleeting or incidental—an email forwarded, a meeting proposed, a passing mention in a deposition. Others, however, reveal continued association after Epstein's 2008 conviction, raising difficult ethical questions about judgment, due diligence and moral responsibility.

The files are therefore less a list of accused individuals than a map of elite social networks—political, academic, corporate and diplomatic—that intersected with Epstein's sphere. The true measure of their impact lies not only in what they disclose, but in how institutions and governments have responded.

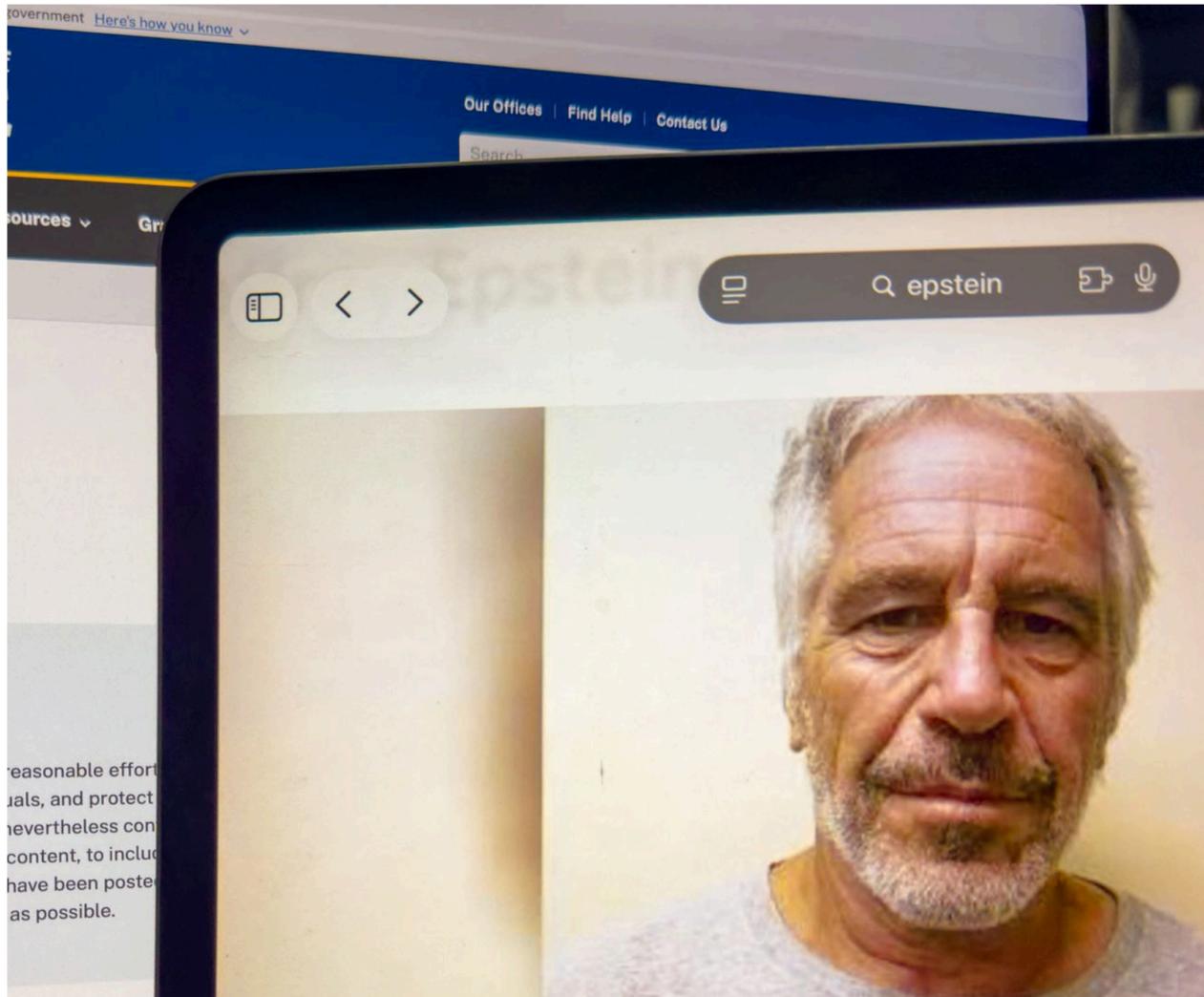
Britain's Institutional Response: Reputation Above Rank
In the United Kingdom, the fallout has been swift and visible, particularly when it intersected with public office and royal status.

Among the most consequential episodes involved Prince Andrew, who had already stepped back from royal duties following earlier controversies tied to Epstein. Renewed scrutiny in 2026 centred not on allegations of sexual misconduct but on questions of propriety: whether confidential information linked to his past trade envoy role had been shared inappropriately. The controversy culminated in formal investigation and legal action, reinforcing a central principle of the British system—that the misuse of public office, even in perception, demands accountability.

Parallel scrutiny fell on Peter Mandelson, former UK ambassador to the United States. Emails revealed a tone of familiarity with Epstein after the latter's 2008 conviction, including comments that critics characterised as dismissive of the seriousness of the case. In 2025, Prime Minister Keir Starmer dismissed Mandelson from his diplomatic role, citing the imperative of upholding ministerial standards. Mandelson later resigned from party positions amid mounting public pressure.

The episode also prompted the resignation of senior aides responsible for vetting processes, reflecting an institutional instinct to demonstrate that reputation

Bad days are not a good excuse to interrupt your good habits.



tional safeguards are taken seriously. The UK's Ministerial Code—anchored in principles of integrity, objectivity and accountability—provided the framework for these decisions. Importantly, none of these measures depended on fresh criminal findings; they were grounded in standards of conduct and public confidence.

In Britain's political culture, association itself—especially post-conviction—can be sufficient to trigger consequences. The emphasis is less on prosecutable offence than on preserving institutional credibility.

Corporate America: Risk Mitigation and Fiduciary Duty
Across the Atlantic, corporate America's response has been shaped less by constitutional doctrine and more by fiduciary calculus.

Several high-profile executives and legal advisers resigned following renewed media attention to their past associations with Epstein. Among them was Thomas Pritzker, executive chairman of Hyatt Hotels, who acknowledged poor judgment in maintaining contact with Epstein after 2008 and stepped down in 2026. In financial circles, Kathryn Ruemmler, then general counsel at Goldman Sachs, announced her departure following revelations of informal correspondence and personal familiarity that critics argued was inconsistent with corporate ethics expectations.

Former US Treasury Secretary Larry Summers faced sustained public criticism for past communications with Epstein and withdrew from certain advisory roles, citing reputational concerns and personal reflection.

In each case, the driving force was not criminal indictment but reputational risk. Corporate boards, mindful of shareholder litigation, regulatory scrutiny and market volatility, opted for decisive action. Governance frameworks such as Sarbanes-Oxley and evolving ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) expectations have raised the cost of ethical ambiguity. Where public trust and investor confidence are at stake, tolerance for controversial associations narrows sharply.

The pattern reveals a distinctly American institutional logic: reputational liability can be as consequential as legal liability.

International Institutions: Moral Audits Beyond Legality
The ripple effects extended beyond national governments. In Norway, Terje Rød-Larsen, president of the International Peace Institute, resigned after disclosures of financial interactions connected to Epstein-linked sources.

The institute initiated an independent audit and redirected funds toward anti-trafficking initiatives.

This approach—combining resignation, audit and remedial redirection—signals a broader norm among international organisations. Legality alone does not suffice; moral legitimacy must also be preserved. In multilateral diplomacy, credibility functions as currency. Associations that compromise perceived impartiality threaten institutional standing.

The Indian Context: Caution, Calculation and Divergent Norms
Against this backdrop of resignations and investigations abroad, India's response to disclosures involving a sitting Union Minister has been markedly restrained.

Document releases in 2025–2026 included emails and calendar entries suggesting professional exchanges and meetings between the minister and Epstein between 2014 and 2017. The correspondence reportedly ranged from discussions about economic initiatives to casual personal greetings. Independent reporting confirmed multiple communications and at least several in-person meetings. No formal action followed. Government representatives characterised the controversy as politically motivated and emphasised that appearance in the files does not imply wrongdoing.

From a strictly legal standpoint, this position is defensi-

ble. No charges have been filed, and no evidence has surfaced linking the minister to criminal activity. Yet politics often operates in the realm of perception and public confidence rather than courtroom standards.

To international observers, the divergence in response highlights differing accountability cultures. In the UK and US, reputational exposure alone prompted resignations or investigations. In India, the threshold for action appears higher, calibrated to demonstrate illegality rather than ethical optics.

This divergence carries implications. As India plays an increasingly prominent role in global forums such as the G20 and positions itself as a voice for democratic governance, its domestic handling of elite controversies inevitably informs external perceptions.

Transparency and accountability have become transnational benchmarks; deviation invites scrutiny. At the same time, the Indian response reflects domestic political realities. In a polarised environment, controversies linked to Western media narratives are often framed as attempts at external interference. For segments of the electorate, resisting such pressure reinforces assertions of sovereignty and political resilience.

Thus, what appears abroad as permissiveness may domestically register as steadfastness. Public Trust, Gender Justice and Democratic Health

The broader question is not confined to one country. It concerns how democracies reconcile legal innocence with ethical responsibility.

Epstein's crimes centred on exploitation and trafficking of minors—offences that have intensified global conversations about gender justice and abuse of power. In that context, continued association with a convicted offender carries symbolic weight. Even absent crim-

inal implication, such ties can appear insensitive to victims' experiences.

In countries where public anger has driven resignations, the calculus has been that institutional credibility depends on erring toward caution. In India's case, the calculus appears to prioritise stability and legal clarity over symbolic distancing.

Both approaches have consequences. Overzealous purges risk conflating association with guilt, undermining due process. Excessive restraint risks fostering perceptions of double standards—stringent enforcement for ordinary citizens, leniency for elites.

Democratic health lies somewhere between these poles.

The Files as a Mirror, Not a Verdict

What distinguishes the Epstein Files from many past scandals is their sheer scale and incremental release. Each tranche reignites debate, recontextualises previous disclosures and tests institutional reflexes anew. They function less as a singular exposé than as a mirror reflecting the ethical architecture of each society they touch.

In Britain, they reinforced the supremacy of ministerial codes. In corporate America, they activated fiduciary safeguards. In international institutions, they prompted moral audits. In India, they have thus far met with legalistic caution and political framing. None of these responses is purely right or wrong; each emerges from distinct political cultures and incentive structures. Yet the contrast itself has become part of the story. As investigative journalism and transparency laws continue to erode traditional boundaries of privacy for public figures, global norms of accountability are converging. Public expectation increasingly demands that leaders be judged not only by legality but by judgment and discernment.

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