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**PERSPECTIVE**

## 282 Recruits, Including 36 Women, Pass Out from Assam Rifles Training Centre

**KOHIMA/DIMAPUR**  
As many as 282 recruits, including 36 women, were formally inducted into the Assam Rifles on Saturday after an attestation parade at the Assam Rifles Training Centre and School (ARTC&S) at Sukhovi in Chümoukedima district of Nagaland. The parade marked the successful completion of 44 weeks of rigorous training, covering battle craft, weapon handling, jungle lane shooting and specialised modules in counter-insurgency operations. The attestation parade was led by Captain Anjali Kirola, according to an official release. The ceremony was reviewed by Major General J S Bainsla, Sena Medal, Additional Director General of Assam Rifles, who addressed the newly inducted personnel and highlighted the rich legacy of the country's oldest paramilitary force and its critical role in safeguarding national security. Maj Gen Bainsla emphasised the expanding role of women in the Assam Rifles, noting that women rifle personnel have been serving in frontline roles since 2015. He said women soldiers have consistently delivered exemplary performance in the North East, Jammu and Kashmir, United Nations peacekeeping missions, and during Republic Day parades in 2019 and 2023. "The presence of women soldiers in frontline roles strengthens national security and furthers the vision of a women-empowered India," he said. Urging the recruits to uphold the highest standards of discipline and professionalism, the senior officer called upon them to adapt to evolving technologies and the challenges of modern warfare. The newly attested personnel will now be posted to their respective units across various operational sectors, the release said.

**WHO SAID WHAT**

**China electricity generation is still growing super fast, with solar being the largest incremental contributor, and will exceed America by a factor of 3X either this year or next.**  
~ Elon Musk, American Entrepreneur

## FICCI Welcomes Union Budget 2026-27, Sees Strong Push for Inclusive Growth and North East Development

**BISWADEEP GUPTA**  
**GUWAHATI:** The FICCI Northeast Advisory Council has welcomed the Union Budget 2026-27, saying it offers an inclusive and forward-looking roadmap for economic growth and job creation amid global and geopolitical uncertainties. Reacting to the Budget, Ranjit Barthakur, Chairman of the FICCI Northeast Advisory Council, said it reflects confidence in India's economic fundamentals and takes a balanced approach to emerging global challenges. He said the continued focus on public capital expenditure, manufacturing, MSMEs and infrastructure will help sustain long-term growth and employment. Barthakur also highlighted the Budget's emphasis on education, healthcare and skill development. He said these areas are vital for building long-term capacity and ensuring inclusive growth, especially for regions like the North East. Strengthening these sectors, he added, will help the region play a stronger role in India's growth story. On infrastructure, Barthakur said the focus on inland waterways and multimodal logistics is particularly important for the North East and Assam. He noted that better river connectivity can



reduce logistics costs, improve market access and unlock economic potential in the region. Welcoming the environmental initiatives, Barthakur said the proposed large-scale deployment of Carbon Capture, Utilisation and Storage shows a growing commitment to sustainable and responsible growth while expanding industrial capacity. Ghanshyam Dhanuka, Chairman of the FICCI Assam State Council, said the Budget includes several announcements directly relevant to Assam. He highlighted the proposed development of Buddhist circuits across Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura, saying it will boost tourism, preserve cultural heri-

itage and generate local employment. Dhanuka also welcomed reforms aimed at improving ease of doing business, including tax rationalisation, reduction in litigation and greater certainty for taxpayers. He said these measures will boost investor confidence and support enterprise-led growth in states like Assam. Joydeep Gupta, Co-Chairman of the FICCI Assam State Council, praised the Budget's strong focus on digital and technology-led growth with regional outreach. He said the tax holiday for cloud services and safe harbour provisions can position India as a global data and cloud hub, opening new opportunities for Assam and the North East. Gupta said IT sector reforms such

as higher safe harbour limits, consolidation of IT services and automated approvals will benefit mid-sized firms, start-ups and digital service providers in Tier-II and Tier-III cities. He also welcomed the promotion of agarwood as a high-value forest product, saying it can boost rural livelihoods, exports and agro-forestry enterprises in Assam. He further noted that strengthening mental healthcare infrastructure, including integration of institutions like Tezpur Mental Hospital with national systems, will improve access to specialised care and help Assam emerge as a regional mental health hub. Larsing Sawyan, Co-Chairman of the FICCI Northeast State Council, said the Budget's focus on tourism, sports, skilling and agriculture will create livelihood opportunities at the grassroots level. He said initiatives like tourism infrastructure development and the Khelo India Mission can support local enterprises, youth participation and community-based economic activity. Overall, FICCI leaders said the Union Budget 2026-27 blends growth, sustainability, technology and regional development, helping Assam and the North East integrate more closely with India's broader economic journey.

## COCOMI rallies in Imphal, demands withdrawal of SoO and protection of Manipur's territorial integrity

**IMPHAL**  
The Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity (COCOMI) organised a large-scale public rally and meeting in Imphal on Saturday, calling for the protection of Manipur's territorial and administrative unity and urging the Government of India to withdraw the Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement with Kuki-Zo insurgent groups. The gathering, held at THAU Ground under the banner "Manipur Kanba Khongchat" (Save Manipur Rally), resolved that the state's unity is non-negotiable and rejected any attempts to divide it. Speakers and participants emphasised that the ongoing ethnic conflict cannot be dismissed as mere "ethnic violence" and warned against actions that threaten civilians or damage public property under this label. COCOMI specifically demanded the immediate revocation of the SoO, which covers over 25 insurgent groups includ-

ing the Kuki National Organization (KNO) and the United People's Front (UPF). Organisers said the agreement, intended to maintain peace and facilitate dialogue, has failed to deliver tangible results. The meeting also urged authorities to halt all unlawful activities by Kuki militants, dismantle cross-border networks and militant infrastructure, and take strict legal action against those terrorising civilians. Participants stressed the need to protect and rehabilitate Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), calling for their safe and timely return to original homes. Highlighting constitutional responsibilities, COCOMI reaffirmed that authorities must uphold the rights to life and property while ensuring peace, accountability, and effective governance to stabilise Manipur. The rally underscored widespread public concern over security, displacement, and the state's long-term territorial integrity.

### NEW DELHI

The Union Budget 2026-27 once again underscores the Centre's stated commitment to the Northeast, invoking themes of connectivity, culture, agriculture and strategic integration. However, a closer look at allocations reveals only incremental gains, with the region's overall share in the Union Budget remaining marginal. In her Budget speech, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman reiterated the government's focus on what she termed the "Purvodaya States and the North-Eastern Region to accelerate development and employment opportunities," placing the Northeast within a broader eastern growth narrative rather than treating it as a distinct fiscal priority. At the heart of the budgetary engagement with the region is the allocation for the Ministry for Development of the North Eastern Region (DoNER). In 2025-26, DoNER received Rs 5,915 crore, around 0.12 per cent of the Union government's total expenditure of Rs 49,64 lakh crore. For 2026-27, the



allocation has increased to Rs 6,812.30 crore. Yet, against the expanded overall Budget outlay of Rs 53.47 lakh crore, DoNER's share rises only marginally to about 0.13 per cent. While the increase is significant in absolute terms, the Northeast's proportional place in the Union Budget remains largely unchanged, continuing to hover just above

one-tenth of one per cent of total central spending. Beyond headline allocations, the Budget's interventions for the region are spread across sectoral themes rather than consolidated into a comprehensive development package. Agriculture figures prominently, especially crops unique to the Northeast's ecology. Announcing support for agar

trees, Sitharaman highlighted the region's agarwood economy alongside high-value crops such as cocoa, cashew and nuts cultivated in other parts of the country. The move signals an effort to commercialise local biodiversity while aligning it with national value-addition and export strategies. Tourism and culture form another visible strand. Describing the Northeast as "a confluence of Theravada and Mahayana/Vajrayana traditions," the finance minister unveiled a new scheme to develop Buddhist circuits across Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura. The initiative aims to preserve monasteries and temples, improve connectivity and upgrade pilgrim amenities, seeking to integrate the region more firmly into India's spiritual tourism map. Infrastructure commitments, meanwhile, are routed largely through national programmes rather than Northeast-specific announcements. Investments in waterways, logistics corridors and tourism infrastructure are expected to benefit the region indirectly. The absence of dedicated budget

lines, however, underscores the continued institutional strengthening in the region. The proposed upgradation of the National Mental Health Institute in Tezpur into a regional apex institution is expected to bolster specialised mental healthcare services and enhance Assam's role in addressing long-standing gaps in the Northeast. Overall, Budget 2026-27 offers continuity rather than transformation for the Northeast-marked by incremental increases, thematic inclusion and symbolic recognition of its cultural and ecological distinctiveness. Despite steady rises in allocations, the region's share of the Union Budget remains virtually static, reinforcing the persistent paradox of rhetorical centrality and fiscal marginality in New Delhi's engagement with India's farthest frontier.

## Manipur BJP, NPP, NPF MLAs Called to Delhi Amid Speculation Over New Government Formation



**IMPHAL**  
All MLAs representing the BJP, NPP, and NPF from Manipur have been summoned to New Delhi for a crucial meeting on February 2, 2026, reportedly to discuss the possible reinstatement of a popular government in the state. The invitations were sent through Manipur Pradesh BJP President A. Sarda Devi, as well as directly to the legislators, instructing all BJP and allied MLAs to assemble in the national capital. This development comes nearly a year after the Manipur Legislative Assembly was placed under suspended animation and the state was brought under President's Rule on February 13, 2025, following the resignation of Chief Minister N. Biren Singh on February 9, 2025. President's Rule, initially imposed for six months, was extended in August 2025 and is set to complete one year on February 12, 2026.

The BJP-led coalition had held a commanding position in the 60-member Assembly at the time President's Rule was imposed, with party positions as follows: BJP (37), NPP (6), NPF (5), INC (5), KPA (2), JD(U) (1), Independents (3), and one seat vacant. Political observers are closely watching the meeting, as it may signal the central leadership's plan for the formation of a new government before the end of the President's Rule period. In the absence of a popular government, the Manipur Budget for 2026-27 is scheduled to be tabled in Parliament-March 10 in the Lok Sabha and March 12 in the Rajya Sabha according to bulletins issued by both Houses. Discussions and voting on Demands for Grants for the state may also proceed at that time if the Assembly remains under suspended animation. The central leadership's outreach to the MLAs comes amid continued uncertainty in the state, which has seen political instability compounded by ethnic tensions and administrative

## Tripura Joins National AI Outreach Ahead of India-AI Impact Summit 2026

**AGARTALA**  
As part of India's expanding push towards artificial intelligence-driven governance, the Directorate of Information Technology, Government of Tripura, on Friday organised a regional-level AI awareness workshop in Agartala ahead of the India-AI Impact Summit 2026. Held at Pragna Bhavan on January 30, the workshop was part of the pre-summit outreach initiatives aimed at familiarising government officials, industry stakeholders and the wider public with emerging applications of artificial intelligence in governance and public service delivery. Officials said the programme aligns with the Centre's broader digital transformation agenda, which increasingly places AI at the core of policy planning and administrative reforms. Artificial intelligence is rapidly transforming sectors such as governance, agriculture, healthcare, education and smart administration, prompting India to accelerate the development of a comprehensive AI adoption framework. Key national initiatives in this direction include the IndiaAI Mission under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) and the National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence formulated by NITI Aayog, both of which seek to position AI as a key enabler of inclusive and sustainable growth.

## Union Budget 2026 to expand Assam's fiscal space, spur jobs: Himanta Biswa Sarma

**GUWAHATI**  
Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Sunday welcomed the Union Budget 2026, describing it as a reform-oriented roadmap aligned with the vision of a "Viksit Bharat" and one that would significantly enhance Assam's growth prospects and employment opportunities. In a post on X, Sarma praised Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman for striking what he termed "a fine balance between India's global aspirations and grassroots development." He said Assam and the wider northeastern region stand to gain substantially from the policy thrust outlined in the budget. A major positive for the state, Sarma noted, is the formal acceptance of the 16th Finance Commission's recommendations. This, he said, is expected to increase Assam's share in tax devolution from 3.128 per cent to 3.258 per cent, thereby expanding the state's fiscal space. Overall transfers to Assam are also projected to rise significantly under the new budget framework. Highlighting the focus on future-ready sectors, the Chief Minister said the budget's emphasis on semiconductors, electronics manufacturing, data centres, chemical parks and rare earths would help create new employment opportunities, particularly for young people, while strengthening the country's industrial

base. Sarma also welcomed the announcement of Self-Help Marts (SHE-Marts), saying the initiative would complement Assam's efforts to build a strong ecosystem of "Lakshpati Didis" under the Mukhyamantri Mahila Udyamita Abhiyan (MMUA) and further promote women-led entrepreneurship across the state. The budget's push for the Orange Economy was flagged as another key opportunity for the Northeast, with Sarma saying it could open new avenues for creative professionals, artists and content creators in the region. In the healthcare sector, he welcomed the decision to upgrade the National Mental Health Institute at Tezpur, noting that it would strengthen specialised mental healthcare services in Assam and improve regional access to advanced treatment facilities. On infrastructure, Sarma said the allocation of Rs 2 lakh crore under the Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment would accelerate infrastructure development in Assam. He also pointed to the provision of Rs 6,812 crore for the development of the Northeast as a reflection of the Centre's continued focus on the region. Commending the budget's emphasis on fiscal discipline and price stability, the Chief Minister said these elements were crucial for maintaining macroeconomic strength while pursuing inclusive and sustainable growth.



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## BUDGETING FOR INDIA'S PUBLIC SECTOR GIANTS

In a striking reversal of trend during the last decade, central public sector undertakings have emerged as an engine of profitability and growth for the exchequer. They have posted record-breaking earnings for the common shareholders and generated substantial dividends and royalties for the government, while preserving their reputation as a source of stable and remunerative employment for millions of Indians.

At the same time, their potential in handholding state PSUs and skilling Indian youth remains untapped. Also, now they are up against serious challenges posed by the new technologies like artificial intelligence, as well as the green transition necessitated by UN's Sustainable Development Goals and EU's carbon tax on exports. Budget 2026 can help harness the real potential of these recently-awakened giants and prepare them for the new challenges.

CPSU earnings have quadrupled over the last decade. In 2024-25, their total net profits exceeded Rs 5 lakh crore. The combined net income of oil companies such as Indian Oil, ONGC, BPCL and HPCL stood at Rs 1.03 lakh crore, even as a fall in oil prices dented the profits of upstream and downstream firms. As of December 31, 2025, petroleum accounted for 8.4 percent of India's gross exports and 20.8 percent of the country's refinery production of petroleum, oil and lubricants.

Non-oil CPSUs also registered robust profitability in 2024-25, with a net income of Rs 3.95 lakh crore. Meanwhile, PSU banks posted record profits of Rs 1.78 lakh crore. SBI's profits alone crossed Rs 79,000 crore. Exports of the defence CPSUs reached a record high of Rs 23,622 crore in the year. Indeed, the efficiency gains are broad-based, spanning the banking, defence and infrastructure sectors.

In 2025, the Indian CPSUs' rankings on the Fortune Global 500 were impressive. Indian Oil, ONGC and BPCL came in at the 127th, 181st and 285th positions, respectively. LIC and SBI ranked 95th and 163rd.

The PSUs' stock market performance was equally remarkable. In 2024-25, they paid out Rs 1.33 lakh crore in dividends. At the end of calendar 2025, PSU fuel stocks accounted for 10.44 percent of the Nifty50 sector weight. These are contemporaneous signals of their cash-generating profiles and investor appetite for them. Since 2017, several core sector enterprises have been listed, creating unprecedented shareholder value and wealth for retail investors. Therefore, Bharat Coking Coal's listing in January 2026 at about 96 percent premium was no surprise.

With a Rs 82,995-crore dividend payout to the Centre last fiscal, CPSUs contributed to the robust fiscal health of the Union. Even undertakings that were once perceived as perennially underperforming behemoths have turned the page. What is even more impressive is that these enterprises have shifted the efficiency frontier while ensuring unprecedented accessibility of their products to the masses.

For instance, as of January 1, there were 33.21 crore active domestic LPG connections. Of these, 10.42 crore were PM Ujjwala Yojana connections. To meet the demand from hitherto-neglected regions, the total length of natural gas pipelines was increased from 15,340 km in 2014 to over 24,600 km by 2023. Similarly, refining capacity has been ramped up to approximately 254 million metric tonnes per annum, positioning India as the world's fourth-largest refiner.

The Union Budget's continued push for capital expenditure has helped companies such as NTPC and Rail Vikas Nigam. A pivot toward renewables and the push for atmanirbharta in defence have boosted the order books of NTPC, HAL and Bharat Electronics. Through backward linkages, these measures have worked as a force multiplier for private companies and smaller enterprises.

The real boost has come from the shift in governance approach from rigid regulatory control to market-driven operations. Maharashtra and Navratna firms now enjoy greater financial and operational autonomy, enabling swifter project execution and operational innovations.

The oil CPSUs have scaled up delivery in rural areas without compromising commercial viability. To improve efficiency by cutting slack, the gas and petroleum distribution systems are being used as a unified—rather than a parallel—national energy infrastructure for multiple services. As of January 1, compressed natural and bio gases were available at 7,763 retail outlets; EV charging was available at 28,711 outlets.

Indian Oil's Panipat refinery's initiative to generate sustainable aviation fuel from used cooking oil is an example of an undertaking repurposing its operations towards sustainability. The SBI's digital transformation is another case in point. The bank's YONO app, with over 74 million users, disbursed Rs 3.2 lakh crore in loans in 2024-25. Its gross non-performing asset ratio fell to 1.82 percent, an impressive record even by international standards.

These pushes toward green and digital transition are financed by cash-generating core operations without external support. These organisations have scaled up infrastructure while delivering exceptional profitability, prompting the market to re-rate them. The PSUs controlled by the state governments need to take a leaf from the CPSUs.

But from now on, CPSUs will face several challenges. Aligning their operations with India's net-zero targets would not be easy, especially for the power, coal and oil companies, which face a difficult choice: go green or face carbon taxes on exports. Even the new free-trade agreements cannot help here.

Moreover, these economic giants need to brace for market volatility caused by geopolitical uncertainty and digital disruption. To sustain the momentum, they will have to focus on strategic investment in digital technology and clean energy along the lines of the National Critical Mineral Mission. These demand modernisation of the service delivery infrastructure on a larger scale, improving efficiency. That, in turn, requires leveraging private funds and expertise to scale up and drive innovation.

Even though CPSUs are on a firmer footing today than they have been in decades, their potential in skilling the youth is yet to be harnessed. Similarly, their financial resources and expertise can be leveraged for strategic investments overseas. Fiscal incentives for public-private partnerships and financial autonomy are going to be the key to the CPSUs' ability to deliver on these fronts. It is here that Budget 2026 can help.

### QUOTE OF THE DAY

“Success is liking yourself, liking what you do, and liking how you do it.”

- Maya Angelou

# BEYOND THE REPUBLIC DAY



LT GEN. R. S. REEN (RETD.)

As the echoes of the bugles fade following the Beating Retreat ceremony on January 29, 2026, a silence will settle over landscapes of Jammu and Kashmir. But unlike the silences of the past which were often heavy with uncertainty, curfews, and the stifling breath of isolation this silence will be one of transition. It is the silence of a region that has finally moved from the “emergency lane” to the “high-speed expressway” of national integration.

Through the prism of the Lieutenant Governor's vision, the post-Republic Day 2026 era represents more than just a calendar shift; it marks the definitive end of “Naya Kashmir” as a mere slogan and the birth of a “New Kashmir” as a living, breathing reality. The journey from 2019 to 2026 has been arduous, but the milestones achieved suggest that the days of navigating a “one-way track” are over.

For decades, the physical isolation of the Kashmir Valley was a tool for political leverage. When the highway closed due to snow or the flights were cancelled due to fog, the Valley didn't just lose supplies; it lost its pulse with the rest of the country. This “climate-dependent isolation” nurtured a sense of separatism.

Today, that narrative has been dismantled by engineering marvels. The road journey from Jammu to Srinagar, once a bone-jarring 10-to-12-hour ordeal prone to landslides at Ramban and Banihal, is now a predictable 4-to-5-hour transit. This is not just about asphalt and tunnels it is about the “distance in time” reducing every single day. With the completion of the Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla Rail Link (USBRL), the third option the train has finally killed the ghost of isolation. When a common man in this can board a train

One of the most significant shifts in the LG's vision for 2026 is the transition from “security management” to “stability management.” For too long, the Valley was viewed through a prism of “security hype” a state where the presence of the uniform was the only visible sign of authority.

Since 2019, a rule-based order has taken root. The “planned agitations,” once the primary currency of regional politics, have been replaced by a quest for municipal excellence. The focus has shifted from the “macro-politics” of identity to the “micro-politics” of delivery. The common man in the Valley is no longer interested in the “lane and drain” promises of the past that were traded for votes and sentiments. They are looking for a government that is “in sync” with the security apparatus only to the extent that it ensures peace, but is hyper-focused on the municipal level: 24-hour electricity, clean water, and world-class road maintenance.

The “security hype” must now diminish to allow tourism the most vulnerable yet vital sector to breathe. Stability in tourism is the only way to ensure that the future of the youth in the Valley is not hijacked by climatic or political blockades.

A fascinating cultural shift is visible in the digital landscape. Once-powerful power brokers, who thrived on the “eye-to-eye” confrontation with Delhi, are now deleting their accounts on X (formerly Twitter) or retreating into a quiet irrelevance. This is a sign of the changing dynamics. The era of “political posturing,” where leaders played both sides of the fence, is over.

The choice for the people of the UT is now clear: Rozgar (Employment), Religion, or Regional Aspirations. While religion remains a personal sanctuary, the LG's vision emphasizes that it cannot be

vate enterprise.

The “Naya Kashmir” of 1944 was symbolized by the plough a sign of agrarian reform and peasant empowerment. While historic, that symbol is now a relic. The “New Kashmir” of 2026 needs a modern symbol: one with Artificial Intelligence (AI) inbuilt.

The future is not in the fields alone it is in the tech-hubs, the startups, and the high-end service sectors. The LG's administration has signaled that the era of contractual labor and surplus government rolls is ending. Even the “surplus pool” of human capital must now rethink their trajectory. The vision is for a private-public synergy where we become exporters of ideas, goods and services from J&K, rather than a market for other players and other states. If the professionals do not build the infrastructure here, everything will eventually move out, draining the UT of its intellectual capital.

The people of the Valley must also understand J&K's place in the new global order. The old dependencies are shifting. While Turkey might emerge as a complex new alliance, the volatility of Afghanistan remains both an opportunity and a challenge that J&K cannot ignore.

More importantly, the shifting goalposts in the Middle East with Saudi Arabia becoming a strategic partner and the UAE redefining its regional role mean that the old ideological anchors of the Kashmiri struggle have been uprooted. Even Iran remains embroiled in its own internal and regional storms. In this context, the LG's vision suggests that J&K's prosperity is inextricably linked to the Indian growth story. Choosing Delhi over distant ideological symbols is no longer just a political choice; it is an economic necessity.

The vision for 2026 is one where the “ripe time” for statehood is not seen as a concession, but as a

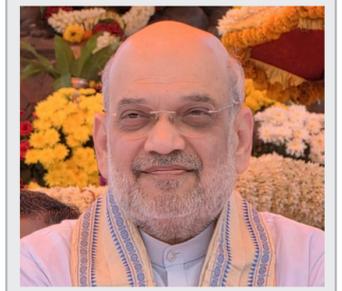
The goal is a sustainable economic model where the UT can eventually pay for its own pensions, salaries, and 24-hour electricity. A “New Kashmir” cannot be a permanent ward of the central exchequer. It must transition into a self-sustaining powerhouse. This requires a “Dharmocracy,” a democracy rooted in the ‘Dharma’ of duty, delivery, and development, rather than the old democracy of emotion and exploitation.

The LG's vision posits that if ideology and regional aspirations continue to take preference over

### DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

**Whether Mamata Banerjee provides land by 31 March as per the High Court's order or not is irrelevant. In April, a BJP Chief Minister will complete the border fencing work within 45 days. This is our promise, and we have proved that we deliver on our promises. In Assam, when the Congress was in power, infiltration was not stopped. But the moment a BJP government was formed, infiltration came to a halt.**

**- Amit Shah, Union Home Minister**



rule-based order, the alternative could be a permanent UT status without a legislature. The choice lies with the people and their future representatives. Do they want a modern, AI-integrated symbol of progress, or do they want to cling to the plough of the past?

Beyond the ceremonial closure of Republic Day 2026, the roadmap for Jammu and Kashmir is one of resilience. The last 30 years were defined by emotional appeals that led to a cul-de-sac of violence and stagnation. The next 30 must be defined by “New Resilience” a resilience against radicalization, a resilience against the “one-way track” of thought, and a resilience that builds trust.

The “Good Days Ahead” are not a gift; they are a construction. Through the LG's prism, we see a UT where the highway is open, the train is whistling through the Pir Panjal, and the youth are busy coding the future rather than pelting the past. With a government in J&K moving in sync with Delhi, the focus remains on the “Municipal” because that is where the common man lives in the warmth of his home, under the light of 24-hour electricity, on a road that leads to a job he created himself.



in Srinagar and reach Delhi without worrying about the weather at Patnitop, the “planned agitations” that relied on choking the Valley's lifeline lose their oxygen. Connectivity is the ultimate antidote to separatism.

the engine of progress. Regional aspirations, if they mean isolation, is a dead end. Therefore, the only viable path is Rozgar driven not by the old, unsustainable dream of “Sarkari Naukri” (government jobs), but by innovation and pri-

graduation. However, this statehood must come with a caveat of maturity. The new legislature must work in harmony with the executive, moving “shoulder to shoulder” with Delhi rather than “eyeball to eyeball.”

## 'Natun Bor Asom' a Dangerous Slogan, Says Himanta Biswa Sarma; Targets Congress Over Identity Politics

GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Friday launched a sharp attack on the Congress over its campaign slogan 'Natun Bor Asom' (New Greater Assam), alleging that the party was attempting to redefine Assamese identity and appease what he described as 'Miya' voters ahead of the Assembly elections.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a Me-Dam-Me-Phi celebration in Guwahati, Sarma questioned the intent behind the slogan and demanded clarity from the Congress and state party chief Gaurav Gogoi. He asked whether the party's vision of a "new Assam" included illegal Bangladeshi immigrants.

"The concept of Bor Asom was established over 600 years ago by Swargadeo Chaolung Siu-Ka-Pha," the Chief Minister said, referring to the founder of the Ahom dynasty. "What is this 'Natun Bor Asom'? What does it mean?" he asked, adding that the slogan appeared to suggest a redefinition of Assamese identity.



Sarma described the slogan as "dangerous" and claimed he had seen it painted on the walls of a Congress office while travelling to the event. "No one seems to have noticed how dangerous this slogan is," he remarked, alleging that the Congress was seeking to include illegal Bangladeshis within the framework of Assamese society.

Later, speaking to reporters at another programme in Khumtai in Golaghat

district, the Chief Minister reiterated his criticism, stating that while the idea of a "new, developed Assam" was acceptable, the Congress was attempting to reshape identity politics by including 'Miyas', a term he used to refer to Bangladeshi infiltrators.

"We understand the Bor Asom of Chaolung Siu-Ka-Pha. But the Congress wants to build its Natun Asom by including Miyas," Sarma alleged. He further

claimed that if the BJP were not in power, the Congress would have "sold Assam" to such groups.

Accusing the Congress of ignoring Assamese interests, Sarma alleged encroachment on satras and land, and accused the party of focusing solely on what he termed appeasement politics. He added that his remarks were directed at illegal infiltrators and not against any community.

Calling for unity among Assamese people, the Chief Minister said the political implications of the slogan had been widely understood and framed the issue as central to the state's future. "This is a matter of life and death for the Assamese people," he said, adding that he would oppose the Congress politically with full force.

The remarks have further sharpened Assam's political rhetoric, with questions of identity, migration and electoral mobilisation returning to the forefront as the state heads towards Assembly elections.

## Will File 'At Least 100 Cases': Himanta Biswa Sarma

GOLAGHAT

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Friday strongly hit back at a police complaint filed against him by social activist Harsh Mander, saying he would respond by filing "at least 100 cases" against Mander.

Speaking on the sidelines of a programme at Khumtai in Golaghat district, Sarma accused Mander of having "destroyed" the National Register of Citizens (NRC) updating process in Assam. The Chief Minister alleged that Mander and other activists played a role in derailing the exercise and were responsible for large-scale irregularities.

"Who is Harsh Mander? I have seen many like him," Sarma said, claiming that activist involvement during the NRC update had "spoiled the entire process". He added that he had been in a position of authority at the time, he would have taken strict action.

The remarks came after Mander reportedly filed a complaint at the Hazrat Nizamuddin station in New Delhi, accusing the Assam

Chief Minister of making public statements that allegedly promote hatred, harassment and discrimination against Bengali-speaking Muslims in the state.

Reacting to the complaint, Sarma said, "He has filed one case against me. Just see, I will file at least 100 cases against him now, as I have the necessary materials for it."

The Chief Minister further alleged that during the NRC updating exercise, fake links were created to facilitate the inclusion of names of ineligible applicants in the list, reiterating his claim that the integrity of the process had been compromised.

The final NRC, published on August 31, 2019, included 3,11,21,004 names out of a total of 3,30,27,661 applicants, though it is yet to be officially notified.

The exchange marks a fresh escalation in the political and legal confrontation between the Assam government and civil society activists, bringing issues related to the NRC, hate speech allegations and communal polarisation back into sharp public focus.

## Manipur Police Nab Two Militants in Separate Operations, Seize Pistol and Narcotics

IMPHAL

Manipur Police have arrested two alleged militant cadres in separate operations across the state and seized a firearm and a large consignment of narcotics, officials said on Saturday.

In the first operation, police arrested Lamginal Chongloi (36), identified as a Sergeant Major of the Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA), near the Saikul-KMC bridge in Kangpokpi district on January 29. A loaded 9mm pistol, along with a magazine and three live rounds, was recovered from his possession.

A day later, on January 30, security personnel apprehended Nameirakpam Roshan Singh (25) from his residence at Langthabal Nimgombam. Police said Singh is an active cadre of the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK). Further investigation is underway to ascertain his role and operational links.

In a separate operation on the same day, security forces arrested Houlim Tongkhokai Mate (33) from Tengnoupal area under Tengnoupal police station in Tengnoupal district. Officials said approximately 8.3 kg of WY tablets were seized from him, along with a Maruti Suzuki Wagon R bearing registration number WB 06 J 3605, a smartphone, and identity documents including Aadhaar and voter ID cards.

Police said the arrests underscore the continuing challenges posed by insurgent activity and narcotics trafficking in Manipur. Investigations are ongoing to establish possible links with larger militant and drug trafficking networks operating in the region.

## Nagaland Mahila Congress Raises Alarm Over Wage Delays, Job Losses Under MGNREGA

DIMAPUR

The Nagaland Pradesh Mahila Congress Committee (NPMCC) on Friday expressed concern over delayed wage payments, fewer workdays and the growing exclusion of women workers under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in the state.

The issues were flagged during an executive and organisational meeting of the NPMCC held at Congress Bhavan here on January 31, which brought together Mahila Congress members from across Nagaland to review the implementation of the rural employment scheme.

Speakers at the meeting said MGNREGA, which guarantees paid work as a legal right, is being steadily weakened, with women workers disproportionately affected. Participants highlighted persistent delays in wage disbursement and administrative hurdles that have curtailed access to employment, particularly for rural and tribal women.

District-level representatives

shared field reports indicating rising economic stress among households that depend on MGNREGA as a primary source of income. The meeting also raised concerns over what it described as inadequate budgetary support and procedural bottlenecks, which, members said, have eroded the scheme's effectiveness and undermined its role as a safety net for vulnerable communities.

The NPMCC resolved to intensify monitoring of MGNREGA implementation across the state, document cases of delayed payments and denial of work, and conduct awareness programmes to inform workers of their rights under the Act. The committee also said it would engage with elected representatives to raise the matter in appropriate legislative forums.

The meeting concluded with a call for coordinated action to safeguard the employment guarantee programme, warning that any further dilution could deepen economic insecurity among women workers in Nagaland.

## AIUDF's Rafiqul Islam Slams Rahul Gandhi, BJP Over Gamosa Row; Calls Citizenship Rhetoric 'Empty'

GUWAHATI

All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) general secretary and MLA Rafiqul Islam on Friday entered the political fray over the Assamese Gamosa controversy, criticising both Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and the BJP leadership while accusing the ruling party of indulging in identity politics and "empty rhetoric" ahead of the elections.

Reacting to reports that Rahul Gandhi did not wear the traditional Assamese Gamosa at a recent public event, Islam said the cultural symbol must be treated with dignity, irrespective of political differences.

"Some people insult the Gamosa by rejecting it, while others insult it by merely hanging it around their necks without understanding or respecting its meaning," Islam said. "What Rahul Gandhi did was also not right. If others are accepting the Gamosa, it should be accepted with love and respect, even if only for a short while."



At the same time, the AIUDF leader trained his criticism on the BJP, questioning what he described as the gap between symbolism and substance. Referring to the frequent public display of the Gamosa by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Islam alleged that such gestures had not resulted in concrete benefits for Assam.

"Prime Minister Modi and Amit Shah always wear the Gamosa around their necks. But what have they actually done for

the Assamese people?" he asked. "There are still lakhs of unemployed youths in Assam. Big promises were made, but they were not fulfilled."

Islam also targeted the BJP's campaign rhetoric on illegal migration, calling it contradictory and misleading. Reacting to recent statements by Amit Shah on identifying and removing "infiltrators" and "Bangladeshis", he described the claims as a "joke".

"The BJP talks about throwing out foreigners, but in reality, they are laying out a red carpet

and giving citizenship," Islam alleged, pointing to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). He claimed that Bengali Hindus who migrated after 1971 were being granted citizenship even as the issue of illegal immigration continued to be politicised during elections.

The AIUDF leader further asserted that Muslims have a long-standing historical presence in the state. "Muslims have been living in Assam for centuries, since the 12th century. Targeting Muslims by BJP leaders is a dream that will never come true," he said, naming Prime Minister Modi, Home Minister Shah and Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

The Gamosa controversy, involving a powerful cultural symbol of Assamese identity and respect, has once again sharpened political sparring in the state, with parties accusing each other of cultural insensitivity and political hypocrisy as Assam moves closer to the Assembly polls.

## BDF Questions Government Over High Court Bench, Second Capital for Dibrugarh While Silchar Remains Ignored

SILCHAR

With the Assam Assembly elections nearing, the Barak Democratic Front (BDF) has asked the state government to clearly spell out its stand on long-pending issues of the Barak Valley, warning that voters will judge the next government on these unresolved problems. In a press statement, BDF chief convenor Pradip Dutta Roy said the monsoon will arrive soon after the elections, and people of Barak Valley may again face floods and broken communication links. He recalled that after the devastating floods of 2022, renovation of canals like Rangl Khal in Silchar and Karimganj was announced, but only about 30 percent of the work has reportedly been completed. In many places, guard walls have already collapsed due to poor quality work, he alleged. Replacement of weak embankments and damaged sluice gates has also been unsatisfactory, he added.

Roy said the proposed dredging of the Barak River under the "Namami Barak" programme has stalled due to lack of political will. Flood-related disruption of rail and road links continues every year, yet no effective alternative arrangements have been made. He pointed out that the Chandranathpur-

Lanka alternative railway line should have been taken up urgently, but the project has not even started. On the much-talked-about six-lane road from Pancharam to Barapani, he said even the Chief Minister has failed to give a clear assurance. Though the highway project may be completed after 22 years, doubts remain about its safety during the monsoon in landslide-prone Dima Hasao. Calling Silchar a neglected and underdeveloped city, Roy said BDF's demand to include Silchar-Guwahati and Silchar-Kolkata air routes under the UDAN scheme has been ignored. Instead, a Silchar-Agartala flight has been introduced, while routes like Silchar-Imphal have been discontinued. He also said people are still worried about the safety of the Gammon Bridge at Badarpur despite renovation.

He stressed that without a permanent solution to floods and connectivity issues, real development of Barak Valley is not possible. He also noted that work on the proposed elevated corridor in Silchar has not begun, and there is no visible progress on the proposed Multi-Modal Logistics Park in Cachar.

Referring to the BJP's Vision Document, Roy said High Court benches were promised

for both Silchar and Dibrugarh. While a bench has now been announced for Dibrugarh, there is no word on Silchar. He also questioned why Dibrugarh has been declared Assam's second capital, while Silchar, the state's second-largest city and far from Guwahati, has been ignored. Even the mini-secretariat in Silchar remains incomplete, he said. BDF media cell convenor Joydeep Bhattacharjee said the creation of the Barak Development Department shows the government has accepted the valley's backwardness, but real work on industry and jobs is missing. He recalled the Chief Minister's promise to build an industrial hub on the abandoned Pancharam paper mill land, which has seen no action. He also pointed to missed opportunities in bamboo-based ethanol plants, small paper mills, and gas-based industries.

Unemployment remains a serious issue, Bhattacharjee said. While recruitment for youths from Barak into government jobs has increased slightly, it is still far from enough. He demanded reservation of Class III and Class IV posts for local candidates, noting that a law already exists but has not been implemented. Private sector jobs are also very limited, he added.

BDF convenor Hrishikesh Deysaid the tea industry, the valley's main industry, is in deep trouble. Floods, high costs, lack of investment, and poor infrastructure have pushed many tea gardens to the brink of closure. Agriculture is also suffering, with farmers leaving the sector due to floods, droughts, and uncertain income. He said the government has failed to promote alternative crops or build strong flood and drought control systems.

Deysaid the long-standing demand to rename the station as "Bhasa Shahid Station" is still pending. Work has not started on the Vivekananda Cultural Centre despite land being allotted. Tourism projects like Bhuvan Pahar development, a ropeway, zoo, and science museum remain only on paper. He welcomed the announcement of an agricultural university but said it must be implemented quickly. While thanking the government for building new bridges over the Barak River and improving some internal roads, BDF demanded clear answers on all pending issues before the elections. Based on the government's response, the party said it would appeal to voters to decide their choice accordingly. The statement was issued by BDF convenor Debayan Deb.

## Arunachal Cabinet Okays Hydropower Incentives, Recruitment Reforms and Governance Revamp

ITANAGAR

The Arunachal Pradesh Cabinet on Friday approved a sweeping set of policy decisions spanning hydropower development, recruitment reforms, ease of doing business, education and digital governance, aimed at strengthening institutions, improving transparency and accelerating inclusive growth across the state.

The Cabinet meeting, chaired by Chief Minister Pema Khandu, was held at Dirang and focused on resolving long-pending administrative bottlenecks while boosting economic and infrastructure development.

To ensure continuity and efficiency in recruitment administration, the Cabinet approved the replacement of the Arunachal Pradesh Staff Selection Commission (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025 with a Bill. The move will allow the appointment of a retired officer as chairperson of the Arunachal Pradesh Staff Selection Board (APSSB), alongside serving officers, to address disruptions caused by frequent transfers.

In a bid to restore public confidence in recruitment processes, the Cabinet also cleared remedial measures recommended by a one-man inquiry commission and approved the streamlining of APSSB pro-



cedures to ensure fair, transparent and efficient selection. Giving a major push to hydropower development, the Cabinet approved GST reimbursement concessions for the 1,200 MW Kala II hydropower project in Anjaw district and the 680 MW Atunli project in Dibang Valley. With a combined investment of about ₹21,700 crore, the projects are expected to generate nearly 458 crore units of free power and around 784 crore through local area development funds, apart from creating significant employment opportunities.

Under the projects, jobs will be reserved for local communities, including 25 per cent of Group A and B posts, 50 per cent of Group C and D posts, and 25 per cent of

skilled and unskilled positions. The Cabinet also approved time-bound compensation, relief and rehabilitation packages for project-affected families, positioning affected communities as long-term stakeholders in hydropower development.

To strengthen technical leadership, a one-time relaxation in recruitment rules for the post of Superintending Engineer (Civil) was approved. The Cabinet also cleared the Renovate-Own-Operate-Transfer (ROOT) policy for small hydropower projects, aligned with the state's "Decade of Hydropower Vision (2025-2035)".

In the education sector, the Cabinet approved the creation of 150 special education teaching posts, comprising 75 trained

graduate teachers and 75 primary teachers, to expand inclusive education. Obsolete state rules relating to the State Information Commission were repealed to align with amended national Right to Information provisions. For improved regulation and public convenience, the Cabinet approved the implementation of the Electronic Inner Line Permit (e-ILP) system. It also cleared the renaming of the regional apple nursery at Dirang in West Kameng district as a regional temperate horticulture nursery, reflecting its expanded mandate.

To bolster institutional capacity, recruitment rules were approved or amended for posts in the departments of Indigenous Affairs, Water Resources (Junior Engineers), Agriculture (Statistical Officers) and Disaster Management, with an emphasis on rationalised pay structures and streamlined promotion norms.

In a significant governance reform, the Cabinet approved the Arunachal Pradesh Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Bill, 2026, which seeks to decriminalise minor offences under select state laws by replacing imprisonment with rationalised monetary penalties, aimed at improving ease of doing business and reducing regulatory burden.

Officials said the decisions reflect the state government's focus on administrative reforms, economic expansion and inclusive development, with hydropower and transparent governance emerging as key pillars of Arunachal Pradesh's growth strategy.

## Foundation Stone Laid for Durga Mandap at Jirighat Under MLA Development Fund



OUR CORRESPONDENT

SILCHAR: On the occasion of the birthday of Assam Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma, a foundation stone laying ceremony was held at Jirighat GP in Lakhimpur.

The programme marked the formal start of construction work of a Durga Mandap, sanctioned with Rs 10 lakh under the MLA Development Fund for the year 2025-26. The initiative aims to strengthen community infrastructure and support cultural and religious activities in the area.

Minister Kaushik Rai attended the programme on Sunday and took part in the ceremonial beginning of the construction work. Speaking

on the occasion, he extended his best wishes to Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma, praying for his good health and long life. The minister expressed hope that under the leadership of the Chief Minister, the state's journey of development would continue to move forward with greater momentum. He also offered prayers to Goddess Durga for peace, progress, and well-being of the people of the region.

Local residents and community members were present during the programme and welcomed the initiative, stating that the Durga Mandap would serve as an important centre for social and cultural gatherings in Jirighat Colony.

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## UPI transaction volume jumps 28% in January: NPCI data



NEW DELHI

Transactions on the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) recorded a 28 per cent year-on-year rise in transaction volume to 21.70 billion in January, while the transaction value grew 21 per cent annually to Rs 28.33 lakh crore, data released by the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) showed on Sunday.

On a month-on-month basis, both transaction volume and value also registered an increase.

The average daily transaction value in January stood at Rs 91,403 crore, up from Rs 90,217 crore in December, according to the data.

The month also recorded an average of 700 million transactions per day, compared to 698 million daily transactions in December.

In December, UPI had logged a 29 per cent year-on-year increase in transaction volume to 21.63 billion, along with a 20 per cent annual rise in transaction value to Rs 27.97 lakh crore.

Meanwhile, monthly transactions through the Immediate Payment Service (IMPS) stood at Rs 6.62 lakh crore in December, marking a 10 per cent year-on-year increase and rising from Rs 6.15 lakh crore in November.

According to a recent report, India reached 709 million active UPI QR codes, reflecting a 21 per cent increase since July 2024.

The report by Worldline India noted that dense QR acceptance across kirana stores, pharmacies, transport hubs, and rural markets has made scan-and-pay the default payment mode

across the country.

Person-to-merchant (P2M) transactions continued to outpace person-to-person (P2P) transactions, underscoring UPI's growing dominance in everyday retail payments.

P2M transactions rose 35 per cent to 37.46 billion, while P2P transactions increased 29 per cent to 21.65 billion, the report said.

The average ticket size declined to Rs 1,262 from Rs 1,363, indicating higher usage for micro-transactions such as mobility, food, healthcare essentials, and hyperlocal commerce.

India's Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), the report added, has played a transformative role in enabling universal access to services, bridging urban-rural gaps, and strengthening the country's position as a global digital powerhouse.

# Railways a strong pillar of Viksit Bharat, this will be extraordinary budget

NEW DELHI

Union Minister of State of Railways, V Somanna, on Sunday called the Railway sector a "strong pillar" of 'Viksit Bharat' and said that the Union Budget will be "extraordinary".

Somanna hinted towards expectations for Railways, saying Prime Minister Narendra Modi aims to focus on every sector.

He said, "Railways is the growth engine of modern India, it is the strong pillar of Viksit Bharat. Last year, the government also allotted a good amount to the railways. PM Modi aims to focus on every sector... This will be an extraordinary Budget."

Rural Tourism Advisor to Aumachal Pradesh, Tourism Advisor to Sikkim and Chairman of Ecotourism, Department of Tourism in West Bengal government, Raj Basu, hailed the Centre's projects and allocation for the urban tourism sector. Basu also flagged "little allocation" for the rural region in the budget.

Basu said, "If we look at Siliguri itself, we will see the way Bagdogra Airport is being upgraded. We are seeing the road network that is coming up. We are seeing the New Jalpaiguri railway line under construction. Better connectivity and infrastructure are being addressed. Owner and entrepreneurship-based skill development should be prioritised. If we look at the budget, we see very little allocation for the rural region. There is a lot of focus on border tourism, which is very important."

Educationalist Abhaya Bose said, "It should be in a true sense a union budget.



There should be no disparity among the states. There should be parity among elementary, basic, and higher education. People below the poverty line, or those struggling, should be able to lead a comfortable life. The budget should also look into that."

FM Sitharaman will present the Union Budget for the financial year 2026-27 in the Lok Sabha as part of the ongoing Budget session of Parliament.

According to the List of Business, the Lower House will meet at 11 am. Sitharaman will present a statement of the estimated receipts and expenditure of the Government of India for the year

2026-27.

The Finance Minister will also lay on the table two statements under Section 3(1) of the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act, 2003. These include the Medium-term Fiscal Policy-cum-Fiscal Policy Strategy Statement and the Macro-Economic Framework Statement.

The List of Business further states that Sitharaman will move for leave to introduce the Finance Bill, 2026, in the Lok Sabha. The Finance Bill gives legal effect to the financial proposals of the government.

She is expected to present a Rs 54.1

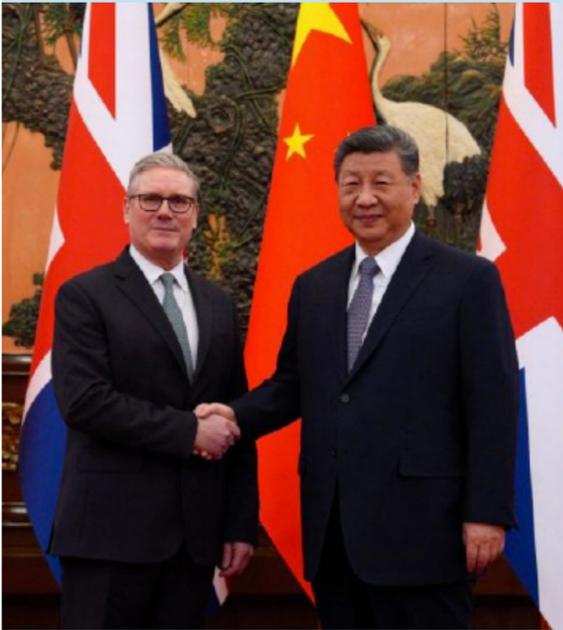
lakh crore Union Budget for FY 2026-27, registering a year-on-year growth of 7.9 per cent, according to a report by Sunidhi Securities & Finance Limited.

The report highlighted that the size of the Union Budget, measured by Total Expenditure (TE) as a percentage of GDP, is the clearest indicator of the government's fiscal intent.

The Budget session will span 30 sittings over 65 days, concluding on April 2. The two Houses will adjourn for a recess on February 13 and reconvene on March 9 to enable the Standing Committees to examine the Demands for Grants of various ministries and departments.

## 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".

## Cachar BUKSS Annual Awards Ceremony Celebrates Sporting Spirit in Silchar



to arrange the inauguration ceremony and ex-



### OUR CORRESPONDENT SILCHAR

The Cachar District Committee of the Barak Valley Sports Journalists' Association (BUKSS) on Saturday organised its much-awaited annual awards ceremony at a marriage hall on Circuit House Road, Silchar. The programme turned into a warm celebration of sports, sportsmanship and the people who work quietly behind the scenes to keep games alive in the region.

The event honoured the best sportspersons of the year along with a sports organiser, recognising dedication, discipline and consistent performance. This year, the Best Organiser award was presented to Nirmalya Nath for his special contribution to the promotion and development of hockey. Along with this, a total of 12 sportspersons from different disciplines were honoured with the Best of the Year awards, drawing loud applause from the audience.

The programme began at 11 am with Ganesh Vandana, setting a positive and respectful tone for the day.



**Be grateful to God for whatever you have. Always!**

Addressing the gathering, ASP Subrata Sen said that he loves to be associated with sports



and praised BUKSS for its steady efforts over the years. He said he has been indirectly associated with BUKSS for the last four years and has closely seen its work. Calling the annual awards function inspiring, he said he felt privileged to be present on the occasion and extended his best wishes to BUKSS for the future.

MLA Dipayan Chakraborty, who attended the programme as a guest, said he was glad to be part of the event and praised BUKSS for taking such initiatives for sports and

sportspersons. He said sports journalists deserve a special mention for their wonderful work, as they play a key role in highlighting talent and keeping sports in public focus. Sharing important information, he informed that Rs 5 crore has been sanctioned by the Assam Chief Minister for DSA development and that another Rs 5 crore will be coming soon. He also said that a new DSA gallery will be inaugurated by the Assam Chief Minister, though the date has not yet been fixed. He requested BUKSS

pressed hope that it would be organised in a wonderful manner. Stressing the need for infrastructure development, he said he has tried his level best to help every club during the last five years. He praised journalists and sports journalists and assured them of full cooperation at any cost. He added that the Assam Chief Minister will also extend support and said that if re-elected, he would help more, especially sports academies.

The programme was smoothly compered by Abhijit Bhattacharjee, who kept the audience engaged throughout.

Silchar DSA president Shibabrata Dutta said the occasion was more than just an award ceremony. He spoke about the urgent need to keep games and sports alive, especially in the present times.

He highlighted the value of sports in daily life and said coordination among body, soul and mind is very important. He pointed out that games and sports help fight anxiety and depression and play a major role in shaping a healthy society. He said sports form an integral part of education and are included in the education curriculum, with institutions dedicated solely to games and sports. He heaped praise on BUKSS for its activities and stressed the importance of sportsmanship and sporting spirit, calling it a must for all. He wished BUKSS continued success in the years to come. Senior sports figure Babul Hore also praised BUKSS for its role, while Mridul Mazumder shared his experiences and spoke highly of the association, recalling its consistent efforts for sports journalism and development. Nilaksha Choudhury said BUKSS has been doing many good activities and expressed happiness at being part of such an event. He praised BUKSS for its commendable work and dedication. Vivek Podder praised BUKSS and assured all sorts of aid and assistance whenever required. Uttam Kumar Saha also commended the efforts of BUKSS and encouraged the association to continue its work. The event saw the presence of a large number of sports lovers, officials and journalists, including Sumanta Das, Razi Hazam, Riten Bhattacharjee, GS Kinkar Das, president Taz Uddin Barbhuiya, Ratan Deb, Jishu Suklabaidya, Babul Hore, Chayan Bhattacharjee, Tamojit Bhattacharjee, Bikash Deb, Amit Nag, Chandan Sharma, Shithil Dhar, Sujon Dutta, Samar Ghosh, Bibhuti Bhushan Goswami, Raju Sengupta, R Alam Laskar, Mridul Mazumder, Bikash Chakraborty, Bikash Shyam, Sudip Singh, Bishu Dutta Choudhury, Milon Uddin Laskar, Shambhu Choudhury, Bikash Das, Ajay Chakraborty, Shanu Choudhury, Aniruddha Laskar, Pritish Paul, Rudra Narayan Gupta and others. The programme concluded with a vote of thanks delivered by Debashish Shome, who expressed gratitude to all guests, participants and organisers for making the event a success.

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# NEIR 2026: A Journey to Unite Communities of Northeast India



Abhishek's Galaxy S23 Ultra  
04 January 2026 12:25 pm



Abhishek's Galaxy S23 Ultra  
04 January 2026 9:38 am



Shot on moto g45 5G  
Ma.GOSWAMI

7 Jan 2026, 1:20 pm



## OUR CORRESPONDENT

### SILCHAR

NEIR 2026 is not just a rally. It is a long walk of ideas, hope, and shared identity. The mission is clear. Bring together nearly 200 communities of Northeast India under one feeling of unity.

The journey is led by Biswadeep Gupta, Managing Trustee and CEO of NEIR. Under his leadership, the rally began on January 4 from Kolkata. It is set to conclude on February 4. One full month on the road. One full month of conversations, meetings, and people coming together.

The Northeast is rich in culture, language, and tradition. Every state has

many tribes and groups. Each has its own stories, songs, food, and history. This diversity is beautiful. But it also brings distance at times. NEIR 2026 tries to close that gap. Its core message is simple. Different roots. One future.

Throughout the rally, the NEIR team has been moving across regions, meeting people from various backgrounds. Students, elders, artists, professionals, and community leaders have all joined the dialogue. The focus is not politics. The focus is people. Listening comes first. Speaking comes next.

Biswadeep Gupta has often spoken about the need for shared values. Respect. Trust. Responsibility. He believes unity does not mean losing identity. It

means protecting every identity while standing together. According to him, Northeast India can only move forward when communities see each other as partners, not strangers.

NEIR 2026 also connects unity with opportunity. The team highlights the need for skills, education, and employment that are rooted in local strengths. Young people are encouraged to learn, but also to return and rebuild their regions. The idea is growth without forgetting home.

A key part of the rally is culture. Music, dance, storytelling, and local history play a big role. These are used not as shows, but as bridges. When people see their culture respected, they open up. That is where real unity starts.

NE India and formed an NEIR Organising Committee which undertook the Rally successfully to give the call of unity among people of NE India.

Gupta echoed, that NEIR is not a 'Class movement' but a 'Mass movement'. NEIR has now entered a phase where continuous messaging through activities and media outreach is underway to connecting people in a common platform to unite, act, and achieve peaceful coexistence to progress in life and prosper through, education, employment generation, increasing employability index, infuse entrepreneurial mindset and develop emotional intelligence in order to bring in prosperity of the region.

The rally also carries messages of peace and oneness. In a region that has seen conflict and misunderstanding, this effort feels timely. NEIR 2026 reminds people that differences are natural, but division is not. As February 4 approaches, the rally moves closer to its end point. But the organisers are clear. This is not the end. It is a beginning. NEIR 2026 is meant to plant a seed. The hope is that communities will continue these talks long after the rally ends.

