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PERSPECTIVE

"No matter how isolated you are and how lonely you feel, if you do your work truly and conscientiously, unknown friends will come and seek you." - Carl Jung

Nagaland Govt Flags Procedural Delays, No Timeline Yet for Ad Hoc Teachers' Regularisation

KOHIMA
The Nagaland Department of School Education has stated that it cannot specify a timeline for the regularisation of ad hoc and contractual teachers, citing mandatory procedures under the state's one-time regularisation policy.

In a press release issued on February 18, the department said that while the government remains committed to addressing the concerns raised by the All Nagaland Adhoc Teachers Group of 2015 (ANATG-2015), the process involves detailed scrutiny and compliance with established norms. ANATG-2015 represents 1,166 teachers appointed on an ad hoc or contractual basis under the School Education Department. According to the department, particulars of 2,484 ad hoc and contract employees across departments have been submitted to a Screening Committee constituted by the Personnel and Administrative Reforms Department.

During the first phase of scrutiny, 235 employees - including 91 members of ANATG-2015 - were found to have furnished complete documentation. The remaining applicants have been asked to submit additional documents to facilitate further processing.

Officials said the scrutiny process includes verification of service records, examination of eligibility criteria, and strict adherence to government norms.

The teachers' body had earlier served an ultimatum demanding immediate regularisation and a clear deadline for completion of the process. In response, the government reiterated that all eligible employees must fulfil stipulated requirements before any proposal can be placed before the Cabinet for consideration.

WHO SAID WHAT



I consider infiltration to be a serious problem. It is not merely about votes, but about the deprivation of rights. Bangladeshi infiltrators are taking away the rights of Assamese people. When the Hon'ble Chief Minister resolved to remove them (the infiltrators), he expressed genuine concern for the people of Assam.
- Nitin Nabin, BJP National President

SC to Hear CAA Petitions in May; Assam, Tripura Cases Separate

NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court of India on Monday said it will commence hearings in May on a batch of petitions challenging the constitutional validity of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (CAA) and the rules framed under it, with cases from Assam and Tripura to be heard separately from those concerning the rest of the country.

A bench headed by Chief Justice Surya Kant, and comprising Justices Joymalya Bagchi and Vipul M. Pancholi, outlined a structured schedule for the long-pending matter and sought clarity from counsel on the time required for arguments.

Addressing the parties, the bench noted that the petitions would be grouped into two categories - those relating specifically to Assam and Tripura, and those arising from other states. "CAA 2019 petitions are divided into two groups, Assam-Tripura and the rest of the country. Nodal counsels will submit lists within two weeks, after which the registry will organise hearings starting the week of May 5, 2026," the court said.

As per the schedule indicated in open court, arguments by petitioners will be heard on May 5 and 6, followed by submissions from respondents on May 7. Rejoinder arguments, if any, will be taken up on May 12.

The CAA has been under judicial scrutiny since shortly after it was enacted by Parliament on December 11, 2019, and received presidential assent the following day. According to court records, a total of 243 petitions have been filed challenging various aspects of the law.

Among the earliest petitioners was the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), which moved the apex court soon after the Act was passed. Several political parties, civil society organisations, student groups, and individuals subsequently approached the court, raising concerns over the legislation's constitutional validity.

The Act amends the Citizenship Act, 1955 by introducing a proviso to Section 2(1)(b), which defines "illegal migrants." Under the amended framework, members of six specified religious communities - Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians - who entered India on or before December 31, 2014, from Pakistan, Bangladesh or Afghanistan are not to be treated as illegal migrants if they have been exempted by the central government under relevant laws.

Specifically, the amendment applies to those exempted under the Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920 and the Foreigners Act, 1946. Such individuals are made eligible to

apply for Indian citizenship through a fast-tracked process.

The exclusion of Muslims from the ambit of the CAA has been at the centre of legal and political controversy since the law's passage. Petitioners contend that the classification based on religion violates the right to equality guaranteed under Article 14 of the Constitution.

Several petitions also argue that the Act undermines the secular structure of the Constitution and is inconsistent with the principle of non-discrimination. In addition, specific challenges from Assam have raised concerns about the law's compatibility with the Assam Accord and its potential demographic impact in the region.

On December 18, 2019, the Supreme Court issued notice to the Union government on the batch of petitions. However, at that stage, the court declined to stay the operation of the Act, noting that the rules required for its implementation had not yet been notified.

For nearly four years thereafter, the legislation remained in force on paper but was not operationalised due to the absence of procedural rules. During this period, the matter remained pending before the apex court without substantive hearings on merits.

Priyanka Gandhi Leads Congress Screening Meet in Guwahati

GUWAHATI

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra arrived in Assam on Thursday for a two-day visit to oversee the Congress party's candidate screening process ahead of the upcoming Assembly elections, signalling a renewed push by the central leadership in the poll-bound state.

The Congress Screening Committee chairperson and Wayanad MP landed at the Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport, where she was received by senior state leaders. The visit is being viewed as a significant intervention by the All India Congress Committee (AICC) in shaping the party's electoral strategy in Assam.

Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) president Gaurav Gogoi said Gandhi's presence would provide grassroots leaders an opportunity to directly communicate with the party's top leadership.

"Whenever the party's central leadership visits, there is enthusiasm among workers. But in large gatherings, many do not get the opportunity to speak. This time, our block presidents and grassroots workers will be able to express their views directly. It is a huge responsibility that Priyanka Gandhi



has taken upon herself," Gogoi said. Soon after her arrival, Gandhi visited the revered Kamakhya Temple atop Nilachal Hill to offer prayers. Party leaders described the visit as both spiritual and symbolic as the Congress intensifies preparations for the elections.

She later proceeded to Assam Pradesh Congress Committee headquarters at Rajiv Bhawan on GS Road, where she began a series of closed-door meetings linked to the screening of prospective candidates.

At Rajiv Bhawan, Gandhi was accorded a traditional welcome with khol and taal performances. She was accompanied by Leader of the Opposition Dehabrata Saikia, APCC chief Gaurav Gogoi, and AICC general secretary in charge of Assam Jitendra Singh, among other senior functionaries.

Manipur CM Announces Phased IDP Resettlement Plan, Fast-Tracks Road and Bridge Projects



IMPHAL

Yumnam Khemchand Singh on Wednesday called for the phased resettlement of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) currently living in relief camps across the state, stating that the government is preparing a comprehensive rehabilitation plan to facilitate their return to their original homes.

Addressing a reception programme at the residence of Sanasam Premchandra Singh, MLA of Kumbi Assembly Constituency in Bishnupur district, the Chief Minister said priority would be given to displaced families from Churachandpur, Moreh and parts of Imphal.

Phased Return of Displaced Families

Large numbers of Meitei families from Moreh and Churachandpur, along with Kuki-Zo residents from areas in the Imphal valley, were forced to flee their homes following the outbreak of ethnic violence on May 3, 2023. Since then, they have been residing in temporary relief camps across Manipur.

Singh said the state government is working on a structured, phased resettlement process to ensure safe and sustainable rehabilitation of the affected families.

He directed Bishnupur Deputy Commissioner Pooja Elangbam to submit a detailed progress report on the construction of prefabricated housing units being developed for displaced families in the district, underscoring the urgency of providing durable shelter solutions.

Infrastructure Push in Bishnupur

Highlighting key infrastructure initiatives, the Chief Minister announced that construction of the Moirang-Wango road via Kumbi would begin within the next 15 days. He reiterated the government's commitment to accelerating long-pending development projects across the state.

In addition, Singh said work on the Napat Bridge would commence on Thursday and is expected to be completed within five days, aimed at improving connectivity in the region. Later in the day, the Chief Minister was accorded a warm reception at Kairenhabhi village in Thanga Assembly Constituency, where he was received by local MLA T. Robindro Singh.

Addressing residents, Singh assured them that their grievances would receive personal attention and that the government would extend all possible support to ensure balanced and inclusive development of the constituency.

The reception programmes in Kumbi and Thanga were attended by senior district officials, including Bishnupur Superintendent of Police Th. Shangkar Deba, along with community leaders and residents.

The announcements come amid ongoing efforts by the Manipur government to stabilise the state following months of unrest and displacement triggered by the 2023 ethnic violence.

Senior Manipur Editor Shot At, Assaulted in Late-Night Ambush in Imphal East

IMPHAL

A senior journalist in Manipur was shot at and physically assaulted in a late-night attack in Imphal East district on February 18, sparking concern within media circles over the safety of press professionals in the state.

Khoirom Loyalakpa, editor of the local vernacular daily Naharol Thoudang, was ambushed near the Hattia cemetery area around 10 pm, according to initial reports. Unidentified armed men allegedly fired two rounds at his four-wheeler before confronting him and subjecting him to a physical assault at the spot.

Sources said the assailants intercepted Loyalakpa's vehicle and opened fire, with bullets striking the vehicle.

The attackers then dragged him out and beat him before fleeing the scene. The motive behind the attack remains unclear.

Loyalakpa was rushed to the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences (JNIMS) in Imphal, where he is currently undergoing treatment. Hospital authorities have not officially disclosed details about the extent of his injuries, but sources indicated that he is under medical observation.

Police have registered a case at Porompat Police Station and launched an investigation. However, no arrests had been reported at the time of filing this report.

Law enforcement officials said efforts are underway to identify and apprehend the assailants.

The incident has raised fresh concerns over the security of journalists working in Manipur, particularly amid the prevailing law-and-order challenges in the state. Media organisations are expected to seek swift action from the authorities to ensure accountability and safeguard press freedom.

Clash Over ILP Demand Sparks Uproar in Meghalaya Assembly

SHILLONG

A sharp exchange between the treasury and opposition benches disrupted proceedings in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly on February 18, as legislators sparred over the long-pending demand for implementation of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system in the state.

The confrontation unfolded during Question Hour after Voice of the People Party (VPP) MLA Ardent Basaiawmoit accused the government of diluting its stand by exploring alternatives instead of firmly pressing the Centre for full ILP implementation.

Opposition Alleges 'Confusion' Over ILP Stand

Raising the issue on the floor of the House, Basaiawmoit alleged that continued discussions about an "ILP-like" system had created confusion among the public.

He questioned whether the government remained committed to the Assembly's resolution seeking ILP implementation or was instead shifting focus to alternative regulatory mechanisms.

The ILP system, which is currently operational in some northeastern states, regulates the entry of outsiders to protect indigenous communities and their interests.

Responding to the allegations, Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma said the government has been proactive in curbing illegal immigration and safeguarding the state's demographic and cultural interests.

He pointed out that the Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Act (MRSSA) is already in force and provides a framework for monitor-

ing the entry and stay of individuals in the state. At the same time, he said, the government continues to pursue the Centre for ILP implementation in line with the resolution passed by the Assembly.

Sangma added that the objective of a new law passed in 2025 is to strengthen monitoring systems and prevent illegal entry into the state.

"We are considering discussions with the Government of India to further strengthen our position," he said.

The Chief Minister further stated that Meghalaya is exploring the possibility of bringing certain districts under provisions of the Immigration and Foreigners Act, which provides a consolidated framework to regulate the entry, stay and monitoring of foreign nationals.

He clarified that the intent is to establish a robust monitoring mechanism similar to a permit-based entry system in restricted areas, without creating unnecessary intervention or disruption.

In a counterattack, Sangma remarked that Basaiawmoit himself had met Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Prime Minister Narendra Modi regarding the ILP demand.

He questioned whether the VPP legislator had followed up with the Centre since the Assembly passed its resolution, prompting loud protests from opposition members.

The high-decibel confrontation forced Speaker Thomas A Sangma to adjourn the House for 10 minutes to restore order. Upon resumption, the Speaker urged members to maintain decorum and disallowed certain allegations raised by VPP MLA Adelbert Nongrum during the debate.

Environmental Social Reformation & Sangai Protection Forum (ESPRF) Celebrates 33rd Foundation Day at Keibul Lamjao

BISWADEEP GUPTA

IMPHAL: The Environmental Social Reformation and Sangai Protection Forum (ESPRF) today celebrated its 33rd Foundation Day at the sacred premises of Phouoibi Leirem-bi, Keibul Lamjao.

Formed on 18th February 1993, ESPRF is the apex body of registered youth clubs from villages surrounding Keibul Lamjao National Park. The organisation was established with the objective of conserving and protecting the environment - particularly the endangered Sangai and Loktak Lake - through social reform and community awareness.

One of its most remarkable achievements was leading a mass movement in the early 2000s to save the Sangai and Loktak Lake, as a young environmental activist and Secretary General of the Sangai Protection Forum during that period. This effort created significant momentum in environmental conservation across the region and was widely appreciated. The experience remains in my heart and mind,



serving as an inspiration in my life.

Keibul Lamjao National Park, spread over 40 sq. km, is the world's only floating national park and the sole natural habitat of the Sangai (brow-antlered deer), declared a National Park in 1977. Over the years, ecological challenges - including the commissioning of the Ithai Barrage by National Hydroelectric Power Corporation - have adversely impacted the lake's biodiversity and the livelihoods of local communities. Speaking on the occasion, former Chairman of the Loktak Development Authority, M. Asnikumar Singh, who has long been associated with the organisation, stated: "For over three decades, ESPRF has served as a vital platform for collective action, mobilising youth and local communities towards the protection of our natural heritage. Its sustained grassroots efforts have significantly contributed to preserving the fragile ecosystem of Loktak Lake and the unique biodiversity of Keibul Lamjao National Park."

Sing further added, "It is time to review the Loktak Hydel Project for

the survival of our treasured Loktak Lake and its Sangai deer. Sangai is the identity of Manipur; its protection must be our collective duty." Dr Nanaocha Sharma, Director (Additional Charge), Institute of Bioresource & Sustainable Development (IBSD), Department of Biotechnology, Government of India, congratulated ESPRF on completing 33 years of environmental activism. Dr Sharma stated, "ESPRF's consistent efforts in mobilising communities for the conservation of Loktak Lake and protection of the endangered Sangai are commendable. Without the active participation of local communities, the Sangai might not have survived." He also highlighted that "IBSD, with its pool of experts and technical expertise, will join hands with all stakeholders to scientifically assess the ecological impact of the Loktak Hydel Project and contribute towards evidence-based conservation planning for Loktak Lake and Keibul Lamjao National Park."

Amit Kaler, IFS, Deputy Conservator of Forests (DCF), Park & Sanctuary, Government of Mani-

pur, assured full governmental support to the initiative.

He said, "The Government, in consultation with experts and community leaders, will formulate an action plan for the conservation of not only the revered Sangai but also Loktak Lake. This participatory model will secure the future of the Lake, the Sangai and the communities around it." The function was graced by Dr Ningthoujam Yaima Singh, President, ESPRF; Oinam Ibojai Singh, Member, Kha-Thinungei Zilla Parishad & Vice President, Manipur Panchayat Parishad; Asem Bidyabasan Singh, Senior Scientific Officer, Loktak Development Authority; Prof. Ksh. Lal Bihari Singh, Manipur University; Dr Kh. Shamungou Singh, Sangai conservationist; and K. Jugeshwore Singh, environmentalist, community leaders, youth club members and womenfolk. The celebration concluded with a soulful rendition of "Tenghari Sangana" by renowned folk singer Nganthoibi Ningthoujam, which deeply moved the audience and added emotional depth to the occasion.



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NE'S FIRST EMERGENCY LANDING FACILITY

P rime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the region's first Emergency Landing Facility (ELF) in Assam's Dibrugarh district that will enhance the country's defence preparedness and infrastructure capabilities in strategically sensitive areas.

The newly commissioned Emergency Landing Facility is designed for defence aircraft operations as well as emergency civilian use, strengthening rapid response capacity in times of military need, natural disasters or humanitarian crises.

Inauguration was marked by aerial display by the Indian Air Force, featuring manoeuvres of advanced fighter jets that emphasises operational readiness and air superiority capabilities.

Prime Minister also launched multiple development projects worth over ₹5,500 crore aimed at improving road, rail, and air connectivity, urban infrastructure and economic growth across Assam as mentioned in the budget.

Dibrugarh (Tea City of India) occupies a crucial geographical position in Assam along the banks of the Brahmaputra River. Its proximity to international borders with China, Bangladesh and Myanmar places it at the heart of India's strategic calculus in the Northeast.

The establishment of the ELF aligns with India's commitment towards broader defence doctrine of enhancing infrastructure along its eastern frontier.

With increasing geopolitical shifts in the Indo Pacific and increased sensitivities along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), such facilities ensure that fighter aircraft can land, refuel and redeploy swiftly without relying on conventional airbases.

Northeast is connected to mainland India through the narrow Siliguri Corridor (Chicken's Neck) is a strategically vulnerable point. Strengthening air infrastructure in Assam mitigates logistical constraints and enhances force mobility, surveillance and disaster response capabilities.

The inauguration of the ELF marks a transition from peripheral frontier to strategic hub. Over the past decade, infrastructure initiatives such as bridges over the Brahmaputra, expanded highways, and enhanced rail connectivity have aimed to integrate the region more closely with national economic and defence frameworks.

The Northeast serves as India's gateway to South-east Asia under the Act East Policy. Air and transport infrastructure strengthens India's diplomatic positioning with ASEAN nations and reinforces cross-border connectivity initiatives.

It will also lead a way towards overall development in the region.

Improved preparedness in Assam also signals India's commitment to safeguarding its eastern part amid evolving regional dynamics. Given Dibrugarh's location near key international trade and strategic corridors, ELF adds a new layer of deterrence and operational flexibility.

Beyond its military utility, Emergency Landing Facility is equipped to assist civilian aircraft during emergencies. Assam frequently experiences severe monsoon flooding and rapid aerial access can significantly improve disaster management efforts.

The projects launched alongside the ELF inauguration are expected to accelerate economic growth. Enhanced connectivity will bolster tea, oil and agricultural industries, while promoting tourism in the scenic Brahmaputra valley.

The Northeast, comprising eight states is home to a mosaic of ethnicities, languages and traditions. Assam itself reflects a confluence of indigenous heritage, Vaishnavite cultural traditions and colonial era influences linked to the tea trade.

Infrastructure investments not only strengthen national security but also help bridge historical perceptions of marginalisation. Improved connectivity fosters cultural exchange, trade and youth engagement, bringing the region closer to the national mainstream while preserving its distinct identity.

As promised in the budget to have special focus on development of the northeast, the Emergency Landing Facility in Dibrugarh represents more than a runway, it is a strategic asset embedded in India's larger vision of government's promise towards people, secure borders, resilient infrastructure, and inclusive regional growth.

With defence preparedness, economic momentum and regional integration converging in Assam, Northeast is increasingly emerging not as India's periphery but as a pivotal frontier of opportunity and security in the current era.



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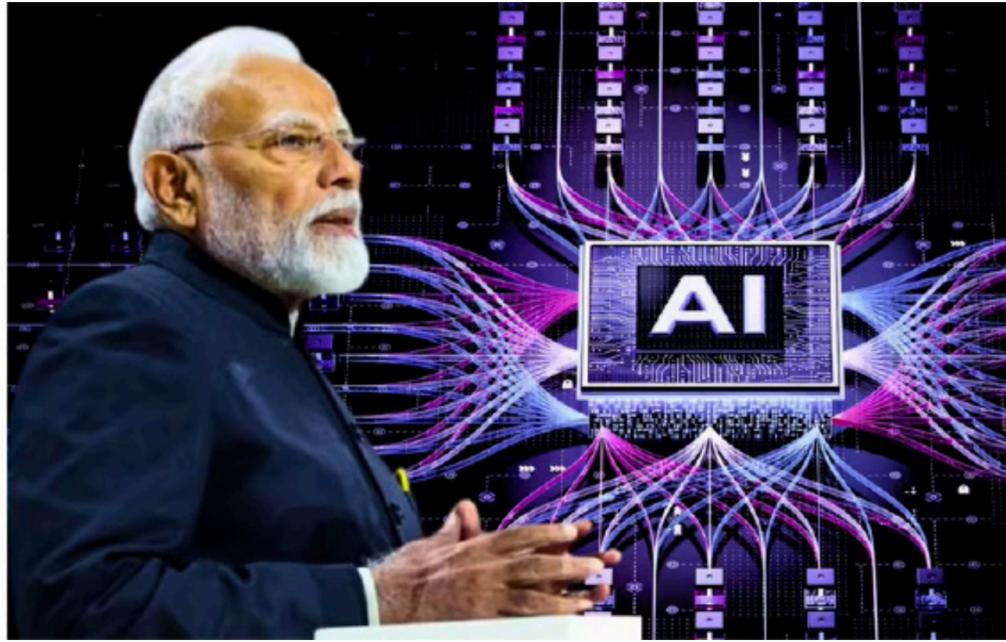
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QUOTE OF THE DAY

"The trouble is, you think you have time." -Buddah

AI-a transformative opportunity in India's journey towards Viksit Bharat



Prime Minister, Narendra Modi talks about Government strategy on AI-driven future for the country in an interview

Excerpts:
You have always spoken about using technology for empowerment and development. How do you see AI's role in Viksit Bharat 2047?

Answer:
AI represents a transformative opportunity in India's journey towards Viksit Bharat 2047. Leveraging AI mindfully, with a strategic lens, helps address deep developmental challenges while creating entirely new economic opportunities, enabling inclusive growth, bridging the urban-rural divide and expanding access to opportunity.

In healthcare, AI is already delivering impact. We are seeing AI based solutions addressing early detection of tuberculosis, diabetic retinopathy, epilepsy and many other ailments at primary and district health centres.

In education, AI-powered personalised learning platforms in Indian languages are helping students in rural and government schools receive customised academic support.

In a very unique initiative, Amul is leveraging AI to reach 36 lakh women dairy farmers across thousands of villages, providing real-time guidance in Gujarati on cattle health and productivity, empowering grassroots women producers.

In agriculture, the Bharat Vistaar initiative aims to integrate AI into crop advisory, soil analytics and weather intelligence, helping farmers make better, localised decisions.

Even in heritage preservation, AI is enabling the digitisation and interpretation of ancient manuscripts, unlocking India's civilisational knowledge systems.

At a time when the world is worried about AI deepening divides, India is using it to dissolve divides. We are making it an efficient tool for delivering healthcare, education and economic opportunity to every village, every district, and every citizen.

In your speech at AI Action Summit 2025 in Paris, you emphasised the bias and limitations of AI. From now and then, has the scenario changed? How do you see India addressing this issue?

Answer: The concerns regarding bias and limitations in AI remain deeply relevant. As AI adoption accelerates, the risks also scale. AI systems can inadvertently perpetuate biases related to gender, language and socio-economic background.

The AI Impact Summit 2026 is bringing together various stakeholders and creating global awareness on matters such as biases and limitations of AI. This is an issue that needs global cooperation.

For India specifically, we face unique challenges and opportunities. Our diversity - linguistic, cultural, regional - means that AI bias can manifest in ways that might not be obvious in Western contexts. An AI system trained primarily on English data or urban contexts may perform poorly for rural users or speakers of regional languages.

The positive development is that India is beginning to address this more systematically. We're seeing increased focus on creating diverse datasets that represent India's plurality, greater emphasis on AI development in regional languages, and growing research on fairness and bias in Indian academic institutions and tech companies.

India's success in building low-cost Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) like Aadhaar and UPI is phenomenal. The convergence of DPI and AI could significantly improve public service delivery. What is India's learning on this, which could help global south?

Answer: India's Digital Public Infrastructure journey offers crucial and practical lessons for the Global South. The convergence of DPI and AI is the next frontier of inclusive development.

Our success with Aadhaar, UPI and other digital public goods was not acciden-

tal. It stemmed from a few replicable principles.

First, we built digital infrastructure as a public good, not a proprietary platform. This open and interoperable architecture allowed innovation to flourish on top of a common base layer.

Second, we designed for scale and inclusion from day one. Our systems work for 1.4 billion people, irrespective of their socio-economic status, literacy level, region or language.

When AI is layered onto this foundation, governance can become far more responsive and efficient. AI can improve welfare targeting, strengthen fraud detection, enable predictive maintenance of infrastructure, support urban planning, and enhance transparency in public systems.

At the same time, we understand the importance of robust digital infrastructure, strong data privacy protections, thoughtful regulatory frameworks and AI literacy across society.

With its experience of building a human-centric Digital Public Infrastructure, India is best placed to ensure that AI's benefits reach the last mile, to farmers in villages, students in small towns, MSMEs, women entrepreneurs, informal workers and youth across rural and urban India, and not remain confined to a narrow urban elite. Technology must serve every citizen, regardless of geography, gender or income.

The goal is not AI adoption for its own sake. It is AI that genuinely empowers citizens and accelerates India's journey toward becoming a developed nation by 2047, and offers a scalable model for the Global South.

India is a powerhouse of engineering talent. We contribute a large tech workforce to the world. How could we further deepen this in the AI era?

Answer:
India has the talent and entrepreneurial energy to become an AI powerhouse, not just as a consumer, but a creator.

Our startups, research institutions and tech ecosystem can build AI solutions that enhance manufacturing, improve governance and generate new jobs.

I am confident that our youth can build AI solutions for Indian realities, designed for farmers, MSMEs, women entrepreneurs and grassroots innovators.

We remain committed to strengthening every effort by our talented youth to make AI a force-multiplier for innovation and inclusion.

The Union Budget 2026-27 reinforces this vision. It expands support for data centres and cloud infrastructure, strengthening domestic compute capacity.

Under the IndiaAI framework, startups and research institutions are being supported with access to high-performance AI compute resources.

Continued push for semiconductor manufacturing, electronics PLI, AI Centres of Excellence and digital skilling strengthens both hardware and human capital foundations.

In short, we are not just nurturing talent, but we are building the infrastructure, policy ecosystem and skills base required for India to move from participating in the AI revolution to shaping it.

6. India has a vibrant IT sector contributing significantly to our service exports. How do you see AI impacting our IT sector? And what are the steps government is taking to bolster our IT sector?

Answer: India's IT sector has been the backbone of our services exports and a key driver of economic growth. AI presents both a tremendous opportunity and a challenge for this sector. AI market projections show India's IT sector could reach \$400 billion by 2030, driven by new waves of AI-enabled outsourcing and domain-specific automation. The fundamental shift is that AI isn't replacing the IT sector. It is transforming it. While general-purpose AI tools have become widespread, enterprise-grade AI adoption is still concentrated in specific sectors, and incumbent IT firms continue to play crucial roles in solving complex

business problems.

To enable a strong Indian AI ecosystem, the government has responded with a comprehensive strategy centered on the IndiaAI Mission. We've already exceeded our initial target of GPUs and we are committed to do more, to provide affordable access to world-class AI infrastructure for startups and enterprises.

We have established four Centres of Excellence in Healthcare, Agriculture, Education and Sustainable Cities plus five National Centres of Excellence for Skilling to equip our workforce with industry-relevant AI expertise.

We want our IT sector to lead not just in service delivery but in building AI products, platforms, and solutions that work for India and the world.

We have seen many examples of AI being misused. How are we ensuring safety of Indians from possible harm of AI technology?

Answer: Technology is a powerful tool, but it is only a force-multiplier for human intent. It is up to us to ensure that it becomes a force for good. While AI may enhance human capabilities, the ultimate responsibility for decision-making must always remain with human beings. Around the world, societies are debating how AI should be used and governed. India is helping shape this conversation by showing that strong safeguards can coexist with continued innovation.

For this, we need a global compact on AI, built upon certain fundamental principles. These should include effective human oversight, safety-by-design, transparency and strict prohibitions on the use of AI for deepfakes, crime and terrorist activities.

India is moving toward a more structured governance approach in AI regulation. With the launch of the IndiaAI Safety Institute in January 2025, the country created a dedicated mechanism to promote the ethical, safe, and responsible deployment of AI systems.

As AI becomes more advanced, our sense of responsibility must grow stronger. What makes India's approach distinctive is its focus on local risks and societal realities. The emerging risk assessment framework considers national security concerns as well as harms to vulnerable groups, including deepfakes targeting women, child safety risks, and threats affecting the elderly.

The urgency of these safeguards is becoming evident to everyone due to the surge in deepfake videos. In response, India notified rules requiring watermarking of AI-generated content and the removal of harmful synthetic media. Alongside content safeguards, the Digital Personal Data Protection Act strengthens data protection and user rights in the digital ecosystem.

India's commitment also extends globally. Just as there are global norms in aviation and shipping to ensure safety and accountability across borders, similarly the world must work towards common principles and standards in AI. Whether through its role in the 2023 GPAI declaration, the Paris AI discussions, or in the current summit, India has consistently advocated a balanced path of advancing innovation while building safeguards for safe and inclusive #AIForAll.

In some section of youth, there is fear that AI will take away their jobs. India's demographic dividend will be difficult to harness if that is the case. How is Government of India tackling this challenge?

Answer: I understand the concern of our youth about AI-driven disruptions in the job market. Preparation is the best antidote to fear. That is why we have been investing in skilling and re-skilling our people for an AI-driven future. The government has launched one of the most ambitious skilling initiatives in the world. We're not approaching this as a future problem but we're treating it as a present imperative.

I view AI as a force-multiplier which will further help us push the boundaries of what we thought possible. It will help doc-

tors and teachers and lawyers to reach out to and help a larger group of people.

History has shown that work does not disappear due to technology. Its nature changes and new types of jobs are created. While some jobs may be redefined, digital transformation will also add new tech jobs to India's economy. For centuries, there have been fears that innovation and technological revolutions will eliminate jobs. Yet history teaches us that whenever innovation happens, new opportunities emerge. The same will be true in the age of AI. India is already well equipped to adapt to this change. In the Stanford Global AI Vibrancy Index 2025, India ranked 3rd, reflecting strong growth in AI R&D, talent, and economy.

Combining innovation with inclusion, we are confident that AI will strengthen

DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

"CEO of Alphabet is Indian. CEO of Microsoft is Indian. CEO of IBM is Indian. CEO of Adobe is Indian. CEO of Palo Alto Networks is Indian. CEO of Chanel is Indian. India doesn't just participate in global innovation; India leads it" -



India's workforce. With the right skills and preparation, our youth will lead the future of work.

Under your leadership, India has developed indigenous technology like 4G-5G, drone technology. What is your vision on AI for Aatmanirbhar Bharat?

Answer: Our journey toward Aatmanirbhar Bharat has been built on a fundamental principle: India must not just consume technology but create it. My vision for AI in Aatmanirbhar Bharat rests on three pillars: sovereignty, inclusivity, and innovation.

My vision is that India should be among the top three AI superpowers globally, not just in consumption of AI but in creation. Our AI models will be deployed worldwide, serving billions in their native languages. Our AI startups will be valued in hundreds of billions, creating millions of high-quality jobs.

Our AI-powered public services will be studied globally as benchmarks for efficient, equitable governance. And most importantly, every Indian will experience AI as an enabler of opportunity, a multiplier of capability, and a servant of human dignity, not as a threat to their livelihood or an instrument of control.

Aatmanirbhar Bharat in AI means India writing its own code for the digital century, and through the IndiaAI Mission, we are ensuring that code reflects our values, serves our people, and positions India as a responsible AI leader for the world.

Rajya Sabha Buzz in Assam: BJP Sources Hint at Talks with Debabrata Saikia, LoP Denies Any Move

GUWAHATI

The announcement of the Rajya Sabha election schedule by the Election Commission of India on February 18 has triggered an unexpected political storm in Assam, with speculation mounting over the possible candidature of senior Congress leader Debabrata Saikia.

The poll panel declared that biennial elections to 37 Rajya Sabha seats across 10 states will be held on March 16. Assam is among the states where three seats are set to fall vacant. While the schedule itself came as no surprise, political circles in Guwahati were soon abuzz with claims that Saikia, Leader of Opposition in the Assam Assembly, could be negotiating for a Rajya Sabha berth - allegedly with the backing of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

BJP Sources Fuel Speculation
Sources within the BJP have claimed that Saikia has been in discussions for

some time regarding a possible entry into the Upper House. Though there has been no official confirmation from the party, insiders suggested that conversations around a Rajya Sabha seat have taken place informally.

The timing of the speculation has raised eyebrows. The Assam Congress is already navigating a turbulent phase following the recent resignation of its former state president Bhupen Kumar Borah, who joined the BJP earlier this week. If Saikia were to follow suit, it would mark yet another significant defection from the Congress ranks ahead of the 2026 Assam Assembly elections.

Such a move, political observers note, could further weaken the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC), which has been grappling with internal dissent and organisational challenges.

CM Sarma Says Candidates "Almost Finalised"

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma addressed the media amid the swirling rumours and said the BJP has "almost finalised" its candidates for all three Rajya Sabha seats from Assam.

"If you check Debabrata Saikia's statements over the last five years, you will see that each time he says his mother is not allowing him to shift. Otherwise, he had no issues joining the BJP," Sarma remarked.

However, he was categorical in asserting that there was no vacancy for any last-minute adjustments.

"The Bharatiya Janata Party has almost fixed candidates for all three seats. There is no vacancy as such. We will contest all three seats in the Rajya Sabha biennial elections and will win all three," the Chief Minister said.

Sarma's remarks have added fuel to the speculation, particularly as they came a day after he publicly predicted

that more senior Congress leaders would join the BJP in the near future.

Saikia Rejects Claims, Calls It 'Speculation'

Debabrata Saikia, however, has dismissed the reports and avoided engaging directly with the claims made by BJP insiders.

"I am unaware of all this. I don't know. These are all speculative news. An attempt to create confusion among Congress ranks. You mention the source, and I will answer based on that," Saikia told reporters.

Earlier in the day, he categorically ruled out any possibility of joining the BJP, seeking to quell the political buzz intensified by Sarma's remarks and Borah's recent defection.

Saikia underlined ideological differences as a key reason preventing any crossover. "Anyone who has public service at heart will do politics for policy and

ideals. We have no good feelings for this outside party that divides Assamese society in the name of ideology, so I won't join the BJP," he said.

Fallout from Bhupen Borah's Exit
The speculation around Saikia has been amplified by the dramatic exit of Bhupen Kumar Borah from the Congress. Borah's resignation has been described by Sarma as a "major political shift" in Assam's political landscape.

Reacting to Borah's departure, Saikia expressed disappointment but maintained a measured tone. "Let him go. I will give him my blessings."

He was my president, and we worked together. When I first became an MLA in 2001, he guided me on how to present my views in the Assembly. I respect his guidance," Saikia said.

He added that he was not aware of the specific reasons that led Borah to leave the Congress.

Sarma, on his part, insisted that Borah's induction into the BJP involved "no bargaining" and framed it as a "homecoming." Drawing a parallel with his own political journey - having switched from the Congress to the BJP years ago - Sarma said, "He did not join after negotiations. I have gone through the same pain."

The Chief Minister further argued that Borah's decision stemmed from deeper structural problems within the Congress.

"Nobody resigns after 30 years without a reason. Congress does not want to address the cause," he said, claiming that several Congress leaders and workers from Guwahati and Lakhimpur are also preparing to join the ruling party.

A day before the Rajya Sabha schedule was announced, Sarma had predicted that both Debabrata Saikia and Congress MP Pradyut Bordoloi would eventually switch sides.

Gaurav Gogoi Says BJP Turncoats Fade into 'Insignificance', Dubs Himanta Biswa Sarma 'Assam's Jinnah'

GUWAHATI

Gaurav Gogoi on Tuesday launched a sharp attack on the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), asserting that leaders who defect to the party eventually become "insignificant" in their political careers. His remarks come amid reports of senior Congress leaders switching sides ahead of the upcoming Assam Assembly elections. Addressing a press conference, the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee president said that those leaving the Indian National Congress to join the BJP would face political marginalisation. Referring to reports that former state Congress chief Bhupen Kumar Borah is set to join the BJP on February 22, Gogoi said such moves would not alter the party's electoral prospects.

"Those who joined the BJP have become insignificant. We can see the example of Sarbananda Sonowal and many more. The Asom Gana Parishad is on the verge of extinction. I don't think I need to talk specifically about Bhupen Borah's joining the BJP," Gogoi said.

He further contended that the next Assembly election in Assam would effectively be a contest between the "real Congress and the old Congress," alleging that the BJP is now largely composed of former Congress leaders who were "most corrupt" during the party's 15-year tenure in the state.

Responding to remarks by Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, who recently described Borah as the "last Hindu leader" in the Congress, Gogoi accused Sarma of attempting to polarise the political discourse. In a strongly worded criticism, he alleged that the Chief Minister was behaving like "Assam's Jinnah" and urged him to stop issuing what he termed as "Hindu certificates" to political leaders.

Emphasising the Congress party's legacy and resilience, Gogoi said the organisation's foundation runs deep in Assam's political history.

Speaker Bans Selfie Videos Inside Meghalaya Assembly After MLA's Budget Session Clip



KRC TIMES NEWS DESK

SHILLONG: Meghalaya Assembly Speaker Thomas A Sangma has barred members from recording and sharing selfie videos from inside the House, calling the act a breach of parliamentary decorum.

The move came after Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit, leader of the Voice of the People Party (VPP) and MLA from Nongkrem, posted a video clip from the ongoing Budget Session on social media.

Taking serious note of the incident, the Speaker invoked Rules 275 and 315 of the Assembly's procedures to prohibit filming and circulation of such videos from within the House premises.

Officials said the decision was aimed at preserving the dignity and discipline of proceedings inside the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly.

The order makes it clear that members are no longer allowed to record personal videos or share visual content from inside the Assembly chamber during sittings.

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Election Readiness Gathers Pace in Kokrajhar as Officials Hold Coordination Meet, Young Voters Trained on EVMs

KOKRAJHAR

With the countdown to the Assam Assembly Elections 2026 underway, Kokrajhar district has intensified its election preparedness, combining high-level administrative coordination with targeted voter awareness initiatives to ensure smooth, transparent and peaceful polling.

In a significant step towards strengthening readiness, a coordination meeting of Civil and Police Zonal and Sector Officers was held at the Science College Auditorium in Kokrajhar. The meeting was chaired by District Commissioner and District Election Officer Pankaj Chakravarty, in the presence of the Senior Superintendent of Police and the Additional Deputy Commissioner (ADC), Kokrajhar.

The deliberations centred on overall election preparedness, including inter-departmental coordination, security arrangements, logistical planning and the delineation of responsibilities among officers at various tiers. Officials emphasised that close coordination between the civil administration and law enforcement agencies would be critical to the efficient conduct of election duties and the maintenance of law and order throughout the polling process.

The district administration underlined the need for timely communication, vulnerability mapping, route planning for movement of polling personnel and materials, and strict adherence to the Model Code of Conduct once notified. Security planning was also reviewed to ensure adequate deployment

in sensitive areas and to facilitate peaceful voting. Parallel to administrative preparations, voter awareness activities under the SVEEP (Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation) programme were ramped up across the district. As part of these efforts, an Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) demonstration session was organised at the Central Institute of Technology, Kokrajhar, specifically targeting newly enrolled and first-time voters.

During the interactive session, officials explained the functioning of EVMs and the VVPAT system, addressing queries and clarifying misconceptions about the voting process. Students and young electors were given hands-on exposure

to the machines to familiarise them with the step-by-step procedure of casting their vote and verifying it through the VVPAT slip display. Authorities highlighted that engaging first-time voters is essential for strengthening democratic participation and building confidence in the electoral system. By equipping young electors with practical knowledge of the voting mechanism, the administration aims to encourage informed and enthusiastic participation in the forthcoming Assembly polls.

With both administrative machinery and voter outreach programmes gathering momentum, Kokrajhar appears to be positioning itself for a well-coordinated and orderly electoral exercise as the state moves closer to the 2026 Assembly elections.

Supreme Court of India Declines PIL on Racially Motivated Violence, Asks Petitioner to Approach Attorney General in Anjel Chakma Case

NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court of India has disposed of a public interest litigation (PIL) seeking separate legal recognition of racially motivated violence within India's criminal law framework, directing the petitioner to first approach the office of the Attorney General of India.

The plea was filed in the backdrop of the alleged racially charged murder of 24-year-old student Anjel Chakma from Tripura in Dehradun. The petitioner, Advocate Anoop Kumar Awasthi, had urged the apex court to frame binding guidelines to specifically address racially motivated violent attacks and to ensure that such crimes are identified and prosecuted distinctly under Indian criminal jurisprudence.



The petition argued that the existing legal framework does not explicitly recognise racially aggravated offences as a separate category, thereby limiting the scope for targeted legal remedies and data collection on such crimes. It sought judicial intervention to establish mechanisms for classifying and prosecuting



liberty to petitioner to hand over a soft copy of the writ petition in the AGI office, also along with copy of this order to enable AGI to take up the matter before the appropriate authority. You first do that. Let us see," the Court observed.

With these directions, the Court closed the proceedings, leaving it open to the petitioner to pursue the matter administratively by submitting a representation to the Attorney General's office for consideration by the appropriate authorities.

The order effectively shifts the immediate course of action from judicial adjudication to executive consideration, even as concerns over racially motivated violence continue to draw public attention in the wake of the Chakma case.

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Timely Probe Foils Rs 4-5 Crore Ginger Subsidy Fraud Bid in Mizoram, Minister Tells Assembly

AIZAWL

A potential embezzlement attempt amounting to Rs 45 crore under Mizoram's ginger support price scheme was averted following a prompt investigation, Agriculture Minister PC Vanlalruata informed the Assembly on Tuesday.

The minister said irregularities first came to light in July last year, prompting the Mizoram Agricultural Marketing Board (MAMB) to initiate a detailed inquiry. The investigation revealed that certain individuals had allegedly attempted to misuse the government's support price mechanism by passing off ginger sourced from outside the state as locally cultivated produce.

According to Vanlalruata, the MAMB inquiry team carried out four field inspections across various Secondary Collection Centres (SCCs) and adjoining clusters. The probe found that middlemen had allegedly procured low-cost ginger, particularly from Myanmar, and uploaded inflated procurement data onto the official government portal in an attempt to claim higher subsidy payouts. Authorities became suspicious after detecting an unusual spike in the volume of ginger registered on the portal, raising concerns about possible diversion or misuse of public funds.

However, the minister clarified that the fraudulent entries were identified and corrected before any payments were disbursed either to the SCCs or to farmers.

"Because the inquiry was launched immediately, we were able to prevent the misappropriation of public money amounting to Rs 4 to Rs 5 crore. Since no funds were actually embezzled, no legal action has been taken at this stage," Vanlalruata said.

Four Secondary Collection Centres were identified as the primary locations where the alleged fraudulent transactions had been attempted.

The minister further informed the House that procurement of ginger from local farmers under the support price system commenced on February 2. The state government has fixed a maximum support price of Rs 50 per kilogram. Private traders are allowed to purchase ginger at a floor price of Rs 30-35 per kilogram, with the price difference reimbursed to farmers by the government.

During the 2024-25 fiscal year, Rs 141.16 crore was released to ginger cultivators under the support price scheme, though only Rs 12.78 crore has so far been realised from actual ginger sales, Vanlalruata stated.

The support price initiative forms part of the flagship agricultural policy of the Lalduhomaled Zoram People's Movement (ZPM) government, which had pledged before the elections to strengthen farmers' incomes. Apart from ginger, the state is procuring turmeric, broomsticks, chilli and paddy under the assured price mechanism aimed at providing stable returns to cultivators.

Trans Activist Malem Thongam Moves Manipur High Court Over NH Blockades, Alleges Threats by CoTU

IMPHAL

Transgender social activist Malem Thongam on Wednesday approached the Manipur High Court, seeking suo motu cognisance of what she termed as the failure of both the State and Central governments to ensure free movement along National Highways in Manipur.

In a petition addressed to the Chief Justice, Thongam alleged inadequate law enforcement in response to life threats purportedly issued by the Committee on Tribal Unity (CoTU) and certain Kuki-Zo organisations. She argued that the prevailing situation amounted to a "systematic violation" of Articles 14, 19 and 21 of the Constitution, which guarantee equality before law, freedom of movement and protection of life and personal liberty.

The plea further contended that despite the constitutional mandate under Articles 256 and 257, the governments had failed to discharge their responsibilities in ensuring law and order and unimpeded highway access. Thongam also alleged that no arrests



had been made in connection with the threats she had reported.

The petition sought legal action against CoTU for allegedly obstructing her "Cycling for Manipur Peace" rally from New Delhi to

Imphal. CoTU is a civil society body representing sections of the Kuki-Zo community, particularly in the Sadar Hills area of Kangpokpi district.

Thongam stated that her move to the

High Court followed alleged inaction on a complaint lodged with the Officer-in-Charge of Kangpokpi district police. The complaint, filed through Heingang Police Station on January 2, 2026, accused CoTU of issuing threats to her life during the course of her campaign. She urged the police to register an FIR regarding the alleged threats.

According to the activist, CoTU had opposed her passage when the rally reached Senapati district in December 2025, cautioning that the movement could heighten tensions ahead of Christmas celebrations.

Alongside the legal challenge, Thongam has initiated a mass signature campaign to mobilise public support for a proposed petition before the Supreme Court of India seeking unrestricted movement along National Highways connecting Manipur. The campaign was launched at Khurai Lamlong in Imphal East district on February 1.

Thongam began her "Cycling for Manipur Peace" rally from Qutub Minar in New Delhi on October 2, 2025, covering more than 2,300 kilometres across several states to advocate for unity and peace. She concluded the first phase of her journey in Imphal on December 19, 2025, arriving at Sekmai Police Station in Imphal West under the escort of a special Border Security Force convoy from Senapati.

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Congress once had mature leaders, now it revolves around Rahul Gandhi: Kiren Rijiju



NEW DELHI

Union Minister of Parliamentary Affairs Kiren Rijiju on Wednesday took a swipe at the Congress following senior leader Mani Shankar Aiyar's "not a Rahulian" remarks, saying the party has steadily declined under the leadership of Rahul Gandhi.

Reacting to Aiyar's statement that he is "a Gandhian, a Nehruvian, a Rajivian, but not a Rahulian," Rijiju said Congress, once led by mature leaders, has now become like Rahul Gandhi, with those around him following suit, and expressed surprise at the party keeping the same leader after three consecutive losses.

"Congress had strong leaders who used to have maturity in their speech and work. Slowly, though, Congress has become like Rahul Gandhi, and those who revolve around him have also become like him. We could not have imagined Congress becoming like this: continuing the same leader even after los-

ing three times in a row. A BJP leader would not remain a leader after losing three times," Rijiju said in an interview.

His remarks come amid a political row triggered by Aiyar's comments on the upcoming Kerala Assembly elections. Aiyar predicted a return to power for the Left Democratic Front (LDF), led by Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, despite expressing personal preference for a United Democratic Front (UDF) victory.

"As a Congressman, I want the UDF to come to power. As a Gandhian, I'm telling the truth that after the brilliant achievements of the Pinarayi government, the Left government is bound to come to power," he said.

"The electorate of Kerala is the most intelligent and the most independent-thinking of any people in India. So, therefore, I want the UDF to come, but I'm afraid, as a Gandhian who's required to tell the truth, I cannot see anyone but the LDF coming to power,"

he said.

Aiyar's remarks sparked a row, with Congress distancing itself from his statement and saying Aiyar was not a part of the party.

To this, Aiyar said, "Rahul Gandhi has forgotten that I am a member of the party. And therefore, I am a Gandhian. I am a Nehruvian. I am a Rajivian, but I'm not a Rahulian."

Congress General Secretary Venugopal on Monday called Aiyar's recent remarks, predicting the return of the Pinarayi Vijayan-led government in Kerala, as his "personal opinion."

Venugopal said his remarks do not reflect the Congress's viewpoint, adding that he is no longer in the party.

"His statement that the Pinarayi government will continue in Kerala is a personal opinion. It is not the party's view. Mani Shankar Aiyar is not currently in the Congress party," Venugopal told reporters.

TMC leader Abhishek accuses ECI of using micro-observers to delete names of voters

KOLKATA

The Trinamool Congress general secretary Abhishek Banerjee on Wednesday made serious allegations against the Election Commission of India (ECI), accusing it of using micro-observers to delete names of voters from the list, violating directives of the Supreme Court (SC).

Abhishek also alleged that a Special Roll Observer (SRO) was giving instructions to the micro-observers through WhatsApp chats to delete the names of voters.

Sharing screenshots of WhatsApp messages on his X account, Abhishek accused the ECI and the SRO of issuing instructions via the messaging service.

"Can SC directives be flouted? The highest court of the land has repeatedly emphasised transparency, due process and adherence to official channels of communication. Yet we are witnessing instructions being circulated over WhatsApp rather than through formal, traceable, and accountable mechanisms," Abhishek wrote.

"Even more disturbing are credible reports of Special Roll Observer, C Murugan, issuing instructions regarding the acceptability of birth certificates to Micro Observers in a WhatsApp group, to inflate deletion numbers. Do I need to remind the ECI of the Supreme Court's categorical directive that the role of micro-observers must remain strictly assistive? Why is the statutory procedure being bypassed, and under whose instructions?" he added in the X post.

The poll official is accused of instructing electoral registration officers (EROs) to reject birth certificates issued by the local panchayats in the rural constituencies as proof of birth.

Abhishek said that his party would take up the issue with the SC when the matter comes up for hearing next.

The Diamond Harbour MP



claimed to have "credible" information against an SRO appointed by the national poll panel, of issuing instructions via WhatsApp to allegedly inflate the numbers of deleted voters.

The apex court, while issuing a set of directives during the hearing, which was attended by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, had stated that the final decision on inclusion and exclusion of electors rested with the EROs.

The micro-observers are not authorised to make any decisions, and all documents issued by competent authorities must be accepted by the central poll panel.

"The highest Court of the land has repeatedly emphasised transparency, due process, and adherence to official channels of communication. Yet we are witnessing instructions being circulated over WhatsApp rather than through formal, traceable, and accountable mechanisms," he wrote. Abhishek claimed there were other anomalies in the process and called for a probe.

"Roll observers are designated district-wise, yet it is seen that login credentials linked to these observers are being accessed from a central location in Calcutta. Login data is being misused to generate queries and specifically target a certain

community at the direction of the ECI's political masters in Delhi," Abhishek said.

"If this matter is independently examined, it will be established that the tower location and IP address of the login device differ from the actual location of the roll observer concerned." The Trinamool Congress said the ECI could not afford to function as a political back office.

A five-member Trinamool Congress delegation headed by its MP Mahua Moitra met the West Bengal Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Manoj Agarwal this evening and sought his intervention on the matter.

INTERNATIONAL

Iran-US nuclear talks may fail due to both nations' red lines – but that doesn't make them futile

TEHRAN

The latest rounds of nuclear talks between the US and Iran are going well enough for now, according to the steady drip of public statements from the main parties involved.

"I think they want to make a deal," said US President Donald Trump on the eve of the latest round of discussions held in Geneva on Feb. 17, 2026. Iran's foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi, noted progress over the "guiding principles" of the talks.

Such optimism was similarly on display during initial talks in Oman earlier in the month. But as someone who has researched nonproliferation and US national security for two decades and was involved in State Department nuclear diplomacy, I know we have been here before.

Optimism also existed in spring 2025, during five rounds of indirect talks that preceded the United States bombing of Iran's nuclear infrastructure as part of a broader Israeli attack. Pointedly, Iran noted in February that a climate of mistrust created by that attack hangs over the efforts for a negotiated deal now.

And underpinning any pessimism over a deal now is the fact that talks are taking place with a backdrop of US military buildup in the Persian Gulf region and counteraction from Iran, including the closure of the Strait of Hormuz for a live-fire drill.

But it is more than mistrust that will need to be overcome. The positions of both the US government and Iran have ossified since May 8, 2018 – the date when the first Trump administration withdrew the United States from the Obama-era Iran nuclear deal.

Iran continues to be unwilling to even discuss its ballistic missile program. This is a red line for them. Yet the United States continues to demand limits to Iran's ballistic missiles and the ending of Iran's support of proxy fighters in the region be included in the nuclear

talks, in addition to having Iran fully abandon enriching uranium – including at the low civilian-use level agreed on under the 2015 nuclear deal.

The talks are taking place amid a wider trend toward the end of what can be called the "arms control era." The expiration of New START – which until Feb. 5, 2026, limited both the size and status of US and Russian nuclear weapons and maintained robust verification mechanisms – together with the increasing willingness to engage in military actions to achieve political goals heightens the challenges for diplomacy.

So why the apparent public optimism from the US government?

Trump believes that Iran is in a weaker position than during his first term, following the largely successful Israeli attacks on Iran's regional proxies as well as on Iran itself.

The strategic capabilities of Tehran's two main sponsored groups, Hamas and Hezbollah, are clearly diminished as a result of Israeli action.

The US may also still feel it has the upper hand following the June 2025 Operation Rising Lion, in which Iran's nuclear infrastructure was attacked in response to an International Atomic Energy Agency report that Iran's stockpile of near-weapons grade enriched uranium surged by over 50% in the spring.

The reopening of talks now also comes in the immediate aftermath of Iran's bloody crackdown on anti-government protests, leaving thousands of protesters dead. The USS Abraham Lincoln carrier group was deployed near Iranian waters in January as a signal to the protesters of US support.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio has said that successful talks must include topics beyond Iran's nuclear program, including the "treatment of (its) own people."

Trump continues to consider mili-

tary options against Iran, warning that "if they don't make a deal, the consequences are very steep." Yet there is a danger that Washington may be overestimating its position.

While the United States maintains that Iranian nuclear sites were "obliterated" in the June attack, satellite imagery indicates that Iran is working to restore its nuclear program. And while Tehran's proxies in Gaza and Lebanon are severely degraded, Iranian-supported militias in Iraq, including the Kataib Hezbollah, have renewed urgent preparations for war – potentially against the US – and the Houthis rebels have threatened to withdraw from a ceasefire deal with the United States.

Moreover, Iran's commitment to its ballistic missile program is stronger than ever before, with much of the infrastructure already rebuilt from Operation Rising Lion.

Iran maintains that the talks must be confined only to guarantees about the civilian purpose of its nuclear program, not its missile program, its support of regional proxy groups or its own human rights abuses.

And that is incompatible with the US' long-held position.

This disagreement ultimately prevented the US and Iran from renewing the now-defunct 2015 political deal during the Biden administration. Signed by China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK, the United States and Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) halted Iran's development of nuclear technology and stockpiling of nuclear material in exchange for lifting multiple international economic sanctions placed on Iran. Ballistic missile technology and Iran's proxy support for regional militias were not included in the original agreement due to Iran's unwillingness to include those measures.

The parties to the Iran deal ultimately decided that a nuclear deal was better than the alternative of no deal at all.

There was a window for such a deal to be resumed in between the two Trump administrations. And the Biden administration publicly pledged to strengthen and renew the Obama-era nuclear deal in 2021.

But by then, Iran had significantly increased its nuclear technical capability during the four years that has passed since the JCPOA collapsed.

That increased the difficulty: Just to return to the previous deal would have required Iran to give up the new technical capability it had achieved for no new benefits.

The window closed in 2022 after Iran removed all of the International Atomic Energy Agency's surveillance and monitoring under the deal and started enriching uranium to near weapons levels and stockpiling sufficient amounts for several nuclear weapons.

The IAEA, the UN's nuclear watchdog, currently maintains only normal safeguards Iran had agreed to before the JCPOA.

Even with the 2025 US strikes, Iran currently has the ability to produce enough fissile material for a nuclear bomb within weeks to several months. This is up from over a year under the 2015 deal.

Although most analysts doubt that Iran has developed the weaponization knowledge necessary to build a nuclear bomb – estimates vary from several months to about two years due to the lack of access to and evidence on Iran's weaponization research – Iran's technical advances reduce the value for the US government of returning to the 2015 deal.

Iran's knowledge cannot be put back into Pandora's box.

But talks do not necessarily need an end point – in the shape of a deal – for them to have purpose. With the increased military brinkmanship, talks could help the US and Iran step back from the edge, build trust and perhaps develop better political relations.

Sri Lankan lawmakers scrap their pensions, delivering on campaign promise



COLOMBO

Sri Lankan legislators overwhelmingly voted on Tuesday to scrap their pensions, in a bid to fulfill a key pre-election campaign promise by the ruling Marxist-leaning government following anger over the country's economic crisis.

Lawmakers passed the bill on Tuesday by 154 votes in the 225-member House, with only two against. The remaining legislators were not present during the vote.

In Sri Lanka, a lawmaker was previously entitled to a pension after serving a five-year term. The new law stops payments to anyone who already receives, or qualifies for, the pension.

President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, voted into office in 2024, pledged to end the practice during his election campaign.

In a similar move, Dissanayake's government abolished perks provided to

former presidents in September in response to popular demand. Those included state funding for housing, allowances, pensions and transport. An office and a staff for former presidents and their widows were also scrapped. There are currently five living past presidents and a widow.

Dissanayake won the vote, riding on public resentment against politicians accused of being responsible for the country's worst economic plight in 2022. The crisis led to a severe shortage of food, medicine, fuel and electricity, and triggered protests that forced then-President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to resign.

Justice Minister Harshana Nanayakkara presented the bill in parliament, saying an election promise had been fulfilled and that lawmakers had no moral right to receive a pension at a time when the country was struggling to emerge from its worst economic crisis.

Sri Lanka declared bankruptcy in April 2022 with more than \$83 billion in debt, more than half it to foreign creditors. It sought the help of the International Monetary Fund, which approved a \$2.9 billion four-year bailout package in 2023, under which Sri Lanka was required to restructure its debt. The island-nation said it had concluded the debt restructuring process after reaching agreements with bilateral and multilateral creditors and private bondholders. Sri Lanka is seeking to obtain \$17 billion in debt service relief.

Sri Lanka's crisis was largely the result of economic mismanagement combined with fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the 2019 terrorism attacks that devastated its important tourism industry. The pandemic also disrupted the flow of remittances from Sri Lankans working abroad.

Colours of Legacy: Imphal Art Gallery Honours L. Shamu Singh on 2nd Anniversary

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The 2nd Anniversary of

Imphal Art Gallery Presents

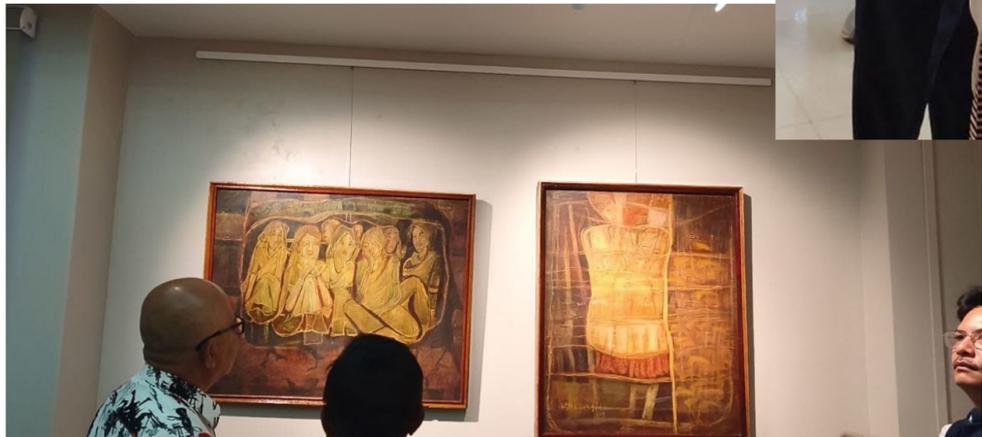
art **Unfading**

18th - 22nd Feb. 2026

Langoljam Shamu Singh (1937 - 2020)

Art Exhibition

3 pm to 7 pm
at Imphal Art Gallery, Kwakeithel, Airport Road, Imphal



BISWADEEP GUPTA

IMPHAL: Imphal Art Gallery today marked its 2nd Anniversary with a solemn and inspiring tribute exhibition in honour of L. Shamu Singh (1937-2020), one of the pioneering figures of Manipur's modern art movement.

Fondly remembered as a gem among the early generation of Manipuri artists, L. Shamu Singh was a maverick who redefined traditional boundaries through his bold and uncompromising artistic expressions. Revered by his contemporaries for mastering a distinct personal style, his canvases vividly reflected the social churn and aesthetic sensibilities of the time. His works drew admiration even from the towering artist-critic K. G. Subramanyan, who had praised him as one of Manipur's most distinctive artistic voices.



The smarter you get, the less you speak.

Throughout his life, L. Shamu Singh remained deeply engaged with the fine arts movement in the State. He participated in numerous exhibitions across the country and contributed significantly as a member of the Standing Committee for Fine Arts and the General Council of the Manipur State Kala Akademi, thereby shaping the cultural discourse of his time.

The anniversary exhibition served both as a celebration of the gallery's two-year

journey and as a heartfelt homage to one of the torchbearers of Manipur's visual arts tradition.

The event witnessed the presence of artists, art enthusiasts and well-wishers who gathered to honour the enduring legacy of L. Shamu Singh.

Speaking on the occasion, Managing Director Robin Wahengbam expressed gratitude to the artistic fraternity and supporters who have stood by the gallery since its inception.

He reaffirmed the gallery's commitment to nurturing emerging talents while preserving and promoting the rich artistic heritage of Manipur. Under his stewardship, Imphal Art Gallery continues to provide a vibrant platform for creative dialogue and cultural expression in the State.

Langoljam Shamu Singh (1937 - 2020)

A gem among the pioneering artists of Manipur, was a maverick who redefined traditional boundaries with his unapologetic approach and was revered by his fraternity as someone who mastered his own style. His intense appraisal of the social upheaval, as well as the aesthetic expression of the community, is well reflected in his canvas. His work garnered the admiration of a towering artist-critic like Padma Vibhushan K.G. Subramanyan, who showered praise on him as one of the distinctive artists of Manipur.

L. Shamu was someone who refused to seclude himself within the confines of narrow domestic walls. He played a significant role in the fine arts movement of Manipur for many years. He participated in numerous exhibitions traversing the art circuit of the country. He also contributed to the Standing Committee for Fine Arts and the General Council of the Manipur State Kala Akademi.

This exhibition is a celebration as well as a tribute to one of the finest torchbearers of the visual arts movement in Manipur by the Imphal Art Gallery.

Imphal Art Gallery