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PERSPECTIVE

Being hated by idiots is the price you pay for not being one of them.

Sushmita Dev seeks swift probe, enhanced security after alleged gang rape on Silchar Bye-pass

SILCHAR
Rajya Sabha MP Sushmita Dev has called for immediate and stringent police action following an alleged gang rape reported from Silchar, writing to the Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) of Cachar district and seeking urgent intervention in the case. In a letter addressed to Cachar SSP Partha Pratim Das, the MP expressed grave concern over reports that the incident occurred on the Silchar Bye-pass Road on the night of February 19. She described the matter as highly sensitive and stressed the need for swift and transparent investigation.

Dev noted that the alleged crime has once again raised serious questions about the safety and security of residents in Silchar town, particularly in areas considered vulnerable after dark. Referring to media accounts, she pointed out that the incident reportedly took place at a time when the district police were engaged in security preparations for the visit of the Union Home Minister and the Chief Minister of Assam to the Barak Valley region.

Seeking clarity on the progress of the investigation, the MP asked the district police to share details of the steps taken so far to identify and apprehend those involved. She urged the SSP to personally monitor the probe to ensure accountability and timely action.

Highlighting what she termed as recurring incidents along the Silchar Bye-pass and adjoining localities, Dev alleged that the stretch has increasingly become unsafe for public movement, especially during night hours. She called for enhanced night patrolling in the area and stronger preventive mea-

WHO SAID WHAT

Legal help is now just a message away! Nyaya Setu brings the Ease of Justice directly to WhatsApp. This streamlined process allows any citizen to verify their number and access a complete menu of legal services. From information to direct lawyer calls, professional support is now swift and accessible through a simple chat. - Ministry of Law & Justice

NEW DELHI/IMPHAL

The Centre has approved the construction of 5,000 houses for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Manipur under the Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana - Gramin (PMAY-G), in a move aimed at accelerating rehabilitation efforts in the violence-hit state.

The approval was granted by Union Agriculture and Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan following a high-level meeting in New Delhi on Monday evening with a Manipur delegation led by Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh. The delegation also included Deputy Chief Ministers Nemcha Kipgen and Losii Dikho.

According to official sources, the houses will be built under the Centre's flagship rural housing scheme, which provides financial assistance for the construction of pucca homes with basic amenities to eligible rural beneficiaries. The allocation is specifically intended



to rehabilitate families displaced by the ethnic violence that has affected the state since last year. The decision is being viewed as part of the Centre's broader efforts to stabilise Manipur and facilitate dignified resettlement for thousands currently residing in relief camps and temporary shelters.

During the meeting, the Chief Minister apprised the Union Min-

ister of the prevailing ground situation, highlighting the scale of displacement and the urgent need for permanent housing solutions. The state government has been seeking enhanced central support to address the humanitarian impact of the prolonged unrest.

Chouhan assured the Manipur leadership of continued assistance from the Centre in rebuilding affected communities and strengthening rural infrastructure. Officials said the houses would be constructed in a time-bound manner following due identification and verification of beneficiaries.

Earlier this month, the state government had submitted a proposal seeking approval for a special PMAY-G project to construct 5,000 houses for those displaced by the violence. Acting on the proposal, the Union Ministry of Rural Development has also approved a special window under the Awas+ 2024 household survey to capture details of eligible affected house-

holds. The state has been permitted to continue the registration process of eligible beneficiaries under the special project. However, the Ministry has directed that identification must strictly adhere to PMAY-G guidelines, with beneficiary details uploaded through the Awas+ 2024 mobile application. Officials further clarified that the houses will be constructed in accordance with the Framework for Implementation (FFI) provisions of PMAY-G.

In addition, the Centre has allowed the state government to sanction houses under the special project to beneficiaries who had earlier received one or more instalments under PMAY-G but whose homes were destroyed during the violence.

The approval is expected to provide significant relief to displaced families awaiting permanent rehabilitation, even as the state continues efforts to restore normalcy and rebuild livelihoods across affected districts.

Akasa Air Launches Operations from Guwahati Airport's New Terminal



GUWAHATI

Akasa Air on Saturday became the first airline to commence operations from the newly constructed terminal at Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport (LGBI), marking a significant step in the expansion of aviation infrastructure in the Northeast.

According to an official release, the airline's inaugural flight from the new terminal operated on February 22, 2026. The flight departed from Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport at 1:40 pm and landed in Guwahati at 4:45 pm. The return service took off from Guwahati at 5:20 pm and arrived in Mumbai at 9:10 pm.

A ceremonial lamp-lighting event was held at the Guwahati airport to mark the occasion, attended by Bhavin Joshi, Co-Founder and Senior Vice President - Strategy, Akasa Air, along with senior airport officials. The programme included a cake-cutting ceremony and the presentation of a commemorative boarding pass to the first passenger of the inaugural flight.

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and Jeet Adani, Director of Adani Airport Holdings Limited (AAHL), were

also present at the event.

The new terminal has been developed by Guwahati International Airport Limited and is operated by Adani Airport Holdings Limited. The facility is expected to enhance passenger capacity and provide improved amenities, streamlining travel experience for domestic and international flyers.

Akasa Air said the move aligns with its strategy to strengthen connectivity to high-growth markets, particularly in the Northeast, and to support the development of modern aviation infrastructure across India.

Since commencing operations in August 2022, the airline has carried over 24 million passengers. It currently connects 26 domestic and six international destinations, including Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Guwahati, Agartala, Kolkata, Dibrugarh, Doha, Jeddah, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Kuwait City, and Phuket.

The airline operates a fleet of 34 Boeing 737 MAX aircraft and has placed an order for 226 additional Boeing 737 MAX planes powered by fuel-efficient LEAP-1B engines. According to the company, these aircraft offer enhanced fuel efficiency, reduced carbon emissions and quieter cabin operations.

Akasa Air also highlighted its passenger-centric offerings, including Café Akasa onboard meals, Pets on Akasa service, Braille safety instruction and menu cards for visually impaired travellers, and add-on services such as Akasa GetEarly, Seat & Meal Deal, Extra Seat and Akasa Holidays.

Describing itself as one of India's most dependable carriers, the airline emphasised its focus on on-time performance, operational efficiency, affordable fares and a technology-driven, service-oriented approach as it expands its footprint in the region.

Nagaland Doctor at AIIMS Gorakhpur Alleges Molestation, Racial Abuse; FIR Filed, Probe Underway

GORAKHPUR

A woman doctor from Nagaland posted at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences Gorakhpur has alleged molestation, sexual assault and racial harassment by three unidentified men in Gorakhpur on the night of February 22. Police have registered an FIR and launched an investigation.

According to the complaint, the incident occurred around 8 pm when the third-year Obstetrics and Gynaecology resident was returning to the AIIMS campus from Orion Mall. The doctor alleged that the three men followed her for nearly 1.5 kilometres, passed obscene remarks and hurled racial slurs targeting her Northeastern identity.

She further stated that one of the accused removed his shirt in an apparent attempt to intimidate her. Near Gate No. 2 of the AIIMS campus, close to an Army camp, one of the men allegedly touched her inappropriately. The accused fled after she raised an alarm.

Following the incident, the doctor approached the North East Federation of All India Resident Doctors (NAFORD), alleging racial discrimination and sexual assault. The organisation described the episode as a serious case of racial violence and harassment and tagged the Chief Minister's Office on X, seeking immediate intervention.

NAFORD has also written to Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, demanding swift identification and arrest of the accused, protection for the victim, and strict legal action.

Senior Superintendent of Police Dr Kaushtubh said an FIR has been registered at the concerned police station under relevant sections of the law based on the doctor's complaint. He added that CCTV footage from the area is being examined and that one motorcycle suspected to have been used in the incident has been identified.

First Assam-Arunachal Border Pillar Erected at Seijosa, Himanta Terms It 'Historic Milestone'



GUWAHATI/ITANAGAR

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Sunday described the erection of the first border pillar along the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh boundary as a "historic milestone", marking a significant breakthrough in the decades-old inter-state boundary dispute.

The inaugural pillar was installed at Seijosa in Arunachal Pradesh's Pakke Kessang district, signalling the start of physical demarcation under the framework of the Namsai Declaration signed between the two neighbouring states.

Calling the development "truly momentous", Sarma said the move brings clarity to areas that had long faced uncertainty and lays the foundation for a structured and mutually agreed demarcation process along the 804.1-km boundary shared by Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

The Namsai Declaration was signed on July 15, 2022, by Sarma and Arunachal Pradesh Chief

Minister Pema Khandu to resolve disputes in 123 villages located along the inter-state boundary. The understanding was subsequently formalised through a Memorandum of Understanding signed in New Delhi on April 20, 2023, in the presence of Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

Sarma said that under Shah's guidance, the Northeast - often referred to as the Ashtalakshmi region - is progressing with a unified vision to resolve legacy disputes and strengthen regional cooperation. He reiterated his government's commitment to resolving the remaining differences and thanked Khandu for his cooperation in advancing the demarcation exercise.

According to officials, of the 123 villages identified as disputed, differences in 71 villages have already been resolved. Discussions are ongoing over the remaining 52 villages, with both state governments engaged in dialogue to reach a mutually acceptable settlement.

Khandu termed the erection of the Seijosa pillar a blueprint for future demarcation work and said the process would deepen cooperation between the two states. He expressed confidence that the ongoing efforts would foster lasting harmony, stability and development in border areas, while strengthening trust among communities residing along the boundary.

Manipur CM Seeks TA Battalion, Pushes IDP Rehabilitation in Talks with Rajnath, BJP Chief

NEW DELHI/IMPHAL

In a series of high-level meetings in the national capital on Monday, Manipur Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh met Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and BJP National President Nitin Nabin, pressing for enhanced security measures and expedited rehabilitation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the state.

The Chief Minister, who took oath earlier this month, sought the Centre's support for raising a Territorial Army (TA) battalion for Manipur and strengthening ongoing efforts to restore peace and stability.

Khemchand first called on Rajnath Singh at his office, accompanied by Deputy Chief Minister Losii Dikho of the Naga People's Front (NPF). The meeting marked his first formal interaction with the Defence Minister since assuming office on February 4.

During the discussions, the Chief Minister urged the Union government to consider raising one Territorial



Army battalion dedicated to Manipur. The proposal is being viewed as significant against the backdrop of persistent security challenges and the need for locally rooted forces familiar with the terrain and social dynamics of the

state. Sources indicated that the Defence Minister assured the state government of full cooperation from the Ministry of Defence.

In a social media post following the

meeting, Khemchand described the interaction as "constructive", stating that key and vital issues concerning the security scenario in Manipur were discussed. He said the Defence Minister conveyed that ensuring the security and safety of Manipur remains a top priority for the Government of India and assured all possible assistance to foster a peaceful and secure environment.

Later in the day, the Chief Minister met BJP National President Nitin Nabin at the party's national headquarters. He was joined by both his Deputy Chief Ministers - Losii Dikho and Nemcha Kipgen, the BJP leader from Kangpokpi district who is also the first woman Deputy Chief Minister of Manipur.

During the meeting, discussions centred on the prevailing law and order situation in the state and measures required to restore lasting peace and public confidence. Party organisational matters and strengthening the BJP's state unit were also taken up.

In a post on social media, Nabin said they held "constructive deliberations" on the security situation and discussed urgent and coordinated measures to bring back stability. He also emphasised the need to further strengthen the party's organisational structure in Manipur to effectively serve the aspirations of the people.

Significantly, the BJP chief urged the Chief Minister to expedite efforts for the resettlement and rehabilitation of internally displaced persons, assuring full support from the party in facilitating the process.

The issue of IDPs continues to be a critical concern in Manipur, where ethnic violence and unrest over the past months have displaced thousands of families. The state government has been working on relief, rehabilitation, and resettlement measures, but challenges remain in restoring normalcy and rebuilding trust among communities.

The Chief Minister's outreach

to both the Union government and the party leadership signals a coordinated push to secure greater central assistance for rehabilitation efforts, alongside strengthening the security architecture.

Earlier in the day, Khemchand also met BJP National General Secretary (Organisation) B. L. Santhosh as part of his consultations with senior party functionaries.

The series of engagements underscore the new Chief Minister's proactive approach in engaging both the Centre and the party leadership at a time when Manipur continues to grapple with security concerns and the long-term rehabilitation of displaced families.

With proposals such as the raising of a Territorial Army battalion and renewed emphasis on IDP resettlement, the state government appears keen to combine security reinforcement with humanitarian measures in its roadmap toward restoring peace and stability.



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RISE OF CROWD JOURNALISM



In the digital age, journalism is undergoing a fundamental transformation. The traditional newsroom, once the primary authority over information, is no longer the sole source of news and interpretation. With the rapid expansion of smartphones, social media platforms and digital networks, ordinary citizens have emerged as powerful producers of news and narratives. This phenomenon, may be described as crowd journalism, marks a significant shift in the structure of public communication and the nature of democratic discourse.

Crowd journalism refers to the production and circulation of news by the masses rather than by professional journalists. From videos recorded on mobile phones to eyewitness accounts shared on social media, the crowd increasingly shapes what society sees, believes and debates. This transformation carries the promise of greater participation and inclusivity, but it also raises serious questions about truth, ethics and accountability in contemporary media culture.

Historically, journalism was governed by professional norms such as verification, editorial oversight and ethical responsibility. News organisations functioned as gatekeepers, filtering information through standards of accuracy and public interest. The rise of crowd journalism has disrupted this model by weakening institutional gatekeeping and enabling information to circulate horizontally, often without editorial mediation. While this shift has opened space for voices that were previously marginalised, it has also blurred the distinction between verified information and opinion, between evidence and emotion.

One of the defining features of crowd journalism is the emotionalisation of public discourse. Unlike professional journalism, which traditionally sought to prioritise rational analysis, crowd-generated content thrives on affective impulses such as anger, fear, pride and outrage. Digital platforms amplify emotionally charged content because it attracts attention and engagement. As a result, public debates increasingly resemble spectacles of sentiment rather than reasoned deliberations. Complex social and political issues are reduced to polarised narratives, and the crowd does not merely report reality but performs it through emotions.

The most profound consequence of crowd journalism is the erosion of epistemic authority. In the absence of institutional mechanisms of verification, misinformation and rumours spread with unprecedented speed. The boundary between truth and falsehood becomes fragile, and public trust in established institutions weakens. In this environment, society appears to be moving towards a post-journalistic condition in which professional journalism competes with millions of unregulated voices, each claiming legitimacy.

Crowd journalism also transforms the nature of moral judgment in the public sphere. Social media often functions as a digital court in which individuals are accused, judged and condemned without due process. The moral authority of the crowd is volatile, driven by ideological biases and emotional impulses rather than careful scrutiny. This phenomenon reflects a broader shift in democratic culture, where public opinion increasingly takes the form of instant reactions rather than reflective judgment.

Despite its apparent spontaneity, crowd journalism is not free from power structures. Digital platforms are governed by corporate interests and opaque algorithms that determine what becomes visible and what remains invisible. While the masses generate content, corporations control its circulation and monetisation. Political actors, too, have learned to harness crowd journalism as a tool of mobilisation and polarisation. The crowd thus becomes not only a source of expression but also a resource for ideological competition.

The challenge posed by crowd journalism is therefore not merely technological but ethical and democratic. Suppressing citizen voices is neither possible nor desirable, yet unregulated mass communication threatens the foundations of informed public life. What is required is not a return to the old hierarchies of media authority but the cultivation of a new ethical culture that combines freedom of expression with responsibility, participation with verification and emotion with reason.

Professional journalism, in this context, faces the task of redefining its role. Rather than competing with the crowd in the race for speed and sensationalism, it must reaffirm its commitment to accuracy, depth and public accountability. At the same time, societies must invest in media literacy and critical thinking so that citizens are better equipped to navigate the complex information environment.

Crowd journalism is one of the most consequential phenomena of contemporary society. It embodies both empowerment and disorder, participation and manipulation, openness and vulnerability. The crowd has become a journalist, but without the discipline of journalism. The future of democratic life will depend on how societies negotiate the tension between mass participation and epistemic responsibility. The question is no longer whether the crowd should speak, but how it can learn to speak with truth, restraint and ethical awareness.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"Let's think the unthinkable, let's do the undoable. Let us prepare to grapple with the ineffable itself, and see if we may not eff it after all."

- Douglas Adams

AUSTRALIA'S SOCIAL MEDIA BAN HOLDS A LESSON FOR INDIA



SUNNY DUA

There was a time when childhood sounded different. It echoed with laughter from playgrounds, arguments over marbles, scraped knees that healed with time, and evenings that ended with stories told by elders. Today, childhood often glows silently from a six-inch screen. The laughter is replaced by scrolling, the arguments by comments, and the stories by reels that vanish in seconds. It is in this fragile moment of global introspection that Australia has taken a bold step – banning social media for children under the age of 16.

The decision has stirred debate worldwide, but it has also held up a mirror for societies like ours, asking an uncomfortable question: do we really need laws for every moral value, or have we forgotten how to regulate our own lives? Australia, by enforcing the world's first comprehensive ban on social media for under-16s, has not merely legislated – it has sent a message. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), Threads, YouTube, Reddit, Twitch and Kick have been directed to block access to minors or face massive fines.

The Australian Prime Minister called it one of the biggest social and cultural changes the nation has witnessed. Governments across Europe, the Americas and Asia are now watching closely. But beyond the mechanics of the ban lies a deeper truth: the moral argument alone was no longer working. For years, we were told that self-regulation would be enough. That parents would guide children. That platforms would moderate content responsibly. That "free speech" justified everything.

It did not work. Algorithms, designed to maximise screen time, turned curiosity into addiction. Infinite scroll mimicked gambling. A single reel watched for two seconds was enough for the system to decide what a child should see next and then flood the screen with similar content, relentlessly, like a perennial river that never dries. Australia decided it could not wait any longer. But while Australia needed a law, India should pause before demanding one.

Our civilisation has always believed that not everything good needs to be enforced by legislation.

Our culture, heritage and family systems taught restraint, balance and responsibility long before smartphones existed. We knew when to speak and when to remain silent. We knew that children learn best not by watching strangers on screens, but by observing life around them. Yet today, paradoxically, many Indian parents, especially in urban centres and even in Jammu and Kashmir, are doing the opposite of what they preach.

Instead of asking children to step away from social media, they are creating accounts for them. Instead of protecting childhood, they are exposing it. In Jammu and Kashmir, one increasingly sees toddlers with Instagram reels, schoolchildren turned into "content creators," and minors performing for likes and views – often under parental supervision. A childhood meant to be lived is being performed. The intention may not always be malicious; sometimes it is pride, sometimes ignorance, sometimes the lure of quick fame. But the outcome is the same: a normal childhood is quietly stolen.

Contrast this with the conduct of many celebrities in Bollywood and Hollywood. Despite living under constant media glare, a growing number of film stars have consciously chosen to keep their children away from social media and paparazzi. Bollywood, in particular, has almost reached an unwritten understanding with photographers – let children be children. Let them go to school, stumble, learn, and grow without flashlights chasing them. If those with the greatest visibility can choose restraint, why can't ordinary families?

One common argument raised against restricting children from social media is liberty. That we are curtailing their freedom, denying them rights, or cutting them off from world knowledge. It sounds persuasive, but it ignores reality. Social media is not a library. It is not a classroom. It is an unfiltered, algorithm-driven marketplace of attention where decency often takes a back seat. Alongside useful information exists content that promotes violence, misogyny, distorted body images, consumerism, and unhealthy comparisons.

Expecting children to filter this on their own is unrealistic – especially when even adults struggle to do so. We must also reflect on our own be-

haviour. We have lost basic phone etiquette. We speak loudly at funerals, scroll through feeds during family gatherings, and glance at screens even during moments of grief. If we, as adults, cannot regulate our phone usage, how can we expect children to magically develop discernment? Social media does not come with a moral filter. Algorithms do not understand culture, age or context. They understand engagement – and nothing more.

Health experts across India have already warned about the consequences of excessive screen time on children. Rising cases of anxiety, sleep disorders, attention deficits, poor eyesight, obesity and social withdrawal are no longer rare. Mentally, children are growing up under constant comparison – likes becoming a measure of self-worth, followers a substitute for friends. The playground is shrinking, while the screen is expanding.

Less use of social media is undeniably better than excessive streaming. Childhood is not meant to be sedentary. This age demands movement – running, falling, sweating, learning teamwork and resilience on open grounds. It demands healthy discussions at home, arguments with cousins, debates with friends, and learning to read emotions face-to-face. Social skills are not learned through comments; they are learned through conversations. Empathy is not developed by emojis; it grows from shared experiences.

Australia's example should not push India immediately towards another law. Instead, it should push us towards introspection. Laws become necessary when societies fail to act on their own values. Do we really want to reach a point where the state has to tell us how to raise our children? Or can we reclaim that responsibility ourselves?

This does not mean demonising technology. Social media, used wisely and at the right age, has value. It can inform, connect and inspire. But timing matters. Exposure matters. Moderation matters. A child who first learns to observe the real world will later navigate the digital world with greater confidence and clarity. A child raised by algorithms will struggle to distinguish reality from performance.

Australia's ban may not be perfect. Children may find ways around it. VPNs may surge. Critics

may argue that regulation drives behaviour underground. But as history shows – from seat belts to smoking bans – behavioural change is a marathon, not a sprint. More importantly, Australia has sound-

DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

Rajaji Utsav is being celebrated at Rashtrapati Bhavan to honour the legacy of first Indian Governor General of Independent India Shri Chakravarti Rajagopalachari. An exhibition on the life and work of Shri C. Rajagopalachari is being organised from 24th February to 1st March 2026 at Amrit Udyan. ~ President of India



ed an alarm. It has told tech giants that profits cannot come at the cost of childhood.

For India, and particularly for regions like Jammu and Kashmir with rich cultural traditions and strong community bonds, the lesson is simpler and more profound. We do not always need laws to adopt morality. Our way of life already teaches us balance. We only need the courage to practise it.

If we continue to place screens in the hands of children before they can even spell their names properly, we should not be surprised if they struggle to read the world around them later. If we continue to trade playgrounds for platforms, we should not lament declining physical and mental health. Childhood, once lost, cannot be legislated back.

We must act now – within our homes, within our families. Let children be raised as children, not as content. Let them earn their first scars on playgrounds, not from online bullying. Let them build personalities shaped by their surroundings, culture and lived experiences – not by viral trends that do not belong to their society or daily routine. Australia has shown what a government can do when patience runs out. India must show what a society can do before it is too late.

Meghalaya Presents Rs 2,672-Crore Deficit Budget; Capital Outlay Crosses Rs 10,000 Crore Mark

SHILLONG

Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma on Monday tabled a deficit budget of Rs 2,672 crore for 2026-27, pegging the shortfall at around 3.5% of the state's Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP), while announcing a record capital outlay of Rs 10,211 crore.

Presenting the budget in the Meghalaya Assembly, Sangma - who also holds the Finance portfolio - said total receipts for the fiscal are projected at Rs 32,000 crore, with total expenditure estimated at Rs 32,023 crore.

Excluding borrowings of Rs 5,379 crore, total receipts are estimated at Rs 26,621 crore. Revenue receipts are projected at Rs 26,583 crore, while capital receipts stand at Rs 5,417 crore.

On the expenditure side, total spending is pegged at Rs 32,023 crore, comprising revenue expenditure of Rs 21,812 crore and capital expenditure of Rs 10,211 crore. After

excluding loan repayments of Rs 2,731 crore, the effective total expenditure is estimated at Rs 29,283 crore, leaving a fiscal deficit of Rs 2,672 crore.

Highlighting a significant milestone, Sangma said capital expenditure has crossed Rs 10,000 crore for the first time in the state's history. The projected capital outlay of Rs 10,211 crore for 2026-27 marks a seven-fold increase from Rs 1,435 crore in 2017-18.

"This reflects our commitment to building long-term infrastructure and productive assets across sectors," the Chief Minister said. He informed that Meghalaya is among the top-performing states under SASCI, an interest-free grant-like facility, with estimated receipts of Rs 4,500 crore in 2026-27 - a 67% increase. These funds will be channelled into ongoing and new capital projects.

Additionally, the government has set a target of mobilising new Externally Aided



Projects (EAPs) worth Rs 15,000 crore in sectors such as roads, power, healthcare, urban infrastructure, and human development. Sangma noted that nearly 90% of the repayment burden for these projects is borne

by the Government of India. Releases under Centrally Sponsored Schemes have more than doubled over the past decade, rising from Rs 2,965 crore in 2017-18 to an estimated Rs 6,833 crore in 2026-27. The Chief Minister

stated that the state is projecting a revenue surplus of Rs 4,771 crore and a closing balance of Rs 714 crore. Interest payments for 2026-27 are estimated at Rs 1,540 crore, while pension payments are projected at Rs 1,980 crore, reflecting rising committed expenditure. Sangma said the government is presenting a climate, youth, gender and SDG-focused budget framework this year. The climate budget for 2026-27 stands at Rs 5,572 crore, marking a 2.8% increase over the previous fiscal. The youth budget has been pegged at Rs 4,824 crore - a sharp 45% increase - while the gender budget allocation stands at Rs 6,849 crore, up 10%.

Key sectoral allocations for 2026-27 include:

- Health: Rs 2,472 crore
- Education: Rs 3,347 crore
- Agriculture and allied sectors: Rs 664 crore
- Urban Affairs: Rs 1,540 crore
- Tourism: Rs 376 crore

The allocations reflect continued emphasis on social infrastructure and economic growth drivers.

Sangma asserted that Meghalaya is now the second fastest-growing state in India and the only state to sustain nearly 10% real GDP growth for three consecutive post-COVID years. He said the government's focus on capital formation, infrastructure expansion, and leveraging central assistance has strengthened fiscal capacity while enabling higher investments in priority sectors. The budget, while projecting a moderate fiscal deficit, signals an aggressive push towards infrastructure creation and sectoral development, with the government banking on sustained economic growth and central support to maintain fiscal stability.

Nagaland Govt Directs ULBs to Stop Toll, Fee Collection; Orders Closure of Check Gates

DIMAPUR

The Nagaland Municipal Affairs Department has ordered all Municipal and Town Councils across the state to immediately halt the collection of certain taxes and fees, including tolls and urban utility charges, citing repeated violations of government directives.

In an order issued by Additional Secretary T. Nchumbemo Oduyo, the department referred to earlier notifications from the Home Department and the Municipal Affairs Department, as well as directives concerning the closure of check gates and the prohibition on levying taxes or fees on goods covered under the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime by Urban Local Bodies (ULBs).

The department noted that multiple complaints had been received against the Dimapur Municipal Council, East Dimapur Town Council and Zunheboto Town Council for continuing to impose tolls and other charges despite clear instructions to desist.

Invoking powers under Section 81 of the Nagaland Municipal Act, 2023, the department directed the councils to stop collecting tolls, urban utility fees, vehicle entry fees, and charges on goods and empty vehicles with immediate effect.

The order clarified that any authority to impose taxes or fees on items listed under Section 124 of the Act requires prior approval of the state government, which has not been granted in these cases. All structures or check gates erected for such collections are to be dismantled or removed immediately, and no later than March 6, 2026. In a parallel directive, Deputy Commissioner of Dimapur Tinojongshi Chang instructed the Dimapur Municipal Council and the East Dimapur Town Council to strictly comply with government orders regarding the closure of unauthorised check gates and toll points.

Manipur: Security forces arrest KCP (MFL) cadre, massive arms cache seized

AIZAWL

Security forces intensified their crackdown on insurgent networks in Manipur over the weekend, arresting an active cadre of a proscribed militant outfit and recovering a cache of sophisticated firearms, ammunition and communication equipment in co-ordinated operations across three districts.

The operations, carried out on February 22 and 23, led to the arrest of an active member of the proscribed outfit Kangleipak Communist Party (Military Faction) (KCP-MFL) and the seizure of assault rifles, carbines, pistols, locally made weapons and wireless sets from Imphal East, Thoubal and Chandel districts.

On February 23, security forces arrested Khaidem Joychandra Meitei alias Inoacha (55), an active cadre of KCP (MFL), from Lamlai Mamang Leikai Samu Lambel under Lamlai Police Station in Imphal East district.

Officials said 50 rounds of

7.62x39 mm live ammunition for AK-series rifles were recovered from his possession during the operation. The arrest is being seen as a significant development in efforts to dismantle underground networks operating in the valley districts.

In a separate operation on the same day, security forces recovered a substantial cache of arms and ammunition from Tentha Erel Ching under Khongjom Police Station in Thoubal district.

The recovered items included:

- One SMG carbine with a magazine
- Three bolt-action rifles
- Two single-barrel breech-loading (SBBL) guns
- One .32 pistol with magazine
- One .32 live round
- One 9 mm blank cartridge
- Three helmets

The recovery points to continued attempts by militant groups to stash weapons in remote and semi-forested pockets of the state.

Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla Flags in National Integration Tour Team at Pallel

PALLEL

Ajay Kumar Bhalla, Governor of Manipur, along with the First Lady, visited the Headquarters 26 Sector of the Assam Rifles at Pallel in Kakching district on Monday and flagged in the team that took part in the National Integration Tour 2025-2026.

The 23 member team included Civil Society Organisation leaders and members of Self Help Groups. During the 15 day tour, they travelled to Ahmedabad, Delhi, Guwahati and Shillong to gain wider exposure and experience the country's cultural diversity.

The Governor was received at the garrison by Maj Gen Gaurav Sharma, IG AR (S), and Brig Robeen Chatterjee, Commander of 26 Sector Assam Rifles.

While speaking with the participants, the Governor



praised the Assam Rifles for organising the initiative. He said such tours help people understand India's diversity

and shared values, and build a deeper sense of unity. Referring to the Prime Minister's vision of Viksit

Bharat 2047, he urged citizens to connect with different parts of the country and strengthen national harmony. Participants shared their experiences and thanked the Assam Rifles for the opportunity. Earlier in the day, the Governor also interacted with trainees undergoing skill development programmes at the Sector Headquarters. He encouraged them to make full use of the training for self growth and independence.

Later, the Governor visited Tengenoual district headquarters, where he was received by the Deputy Commissioner and Superintendent of Police. Officials briefed him on administrative and security matters. The Governor and the First Lady also planted saplings at the Deputy Commissioner's Office complex under the Ek Ped Maa Ke Naam campaign.

Alliance Talks Intensify in Assam; CM Says Congress-AJP Deal Near, Rajior Dal Negotiations Stalled

GUWAHATI

Political negotiations ahead of the upcoming Assembly elections gathered pace on Monday, with Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma claiming that a seat-sharing arrangement between the Indian National Congress and the Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) is "almost completed", even as discussions between the Congress and Rajior Dal remain unresolved. Addressing the press after a programme in Guwahati, Sarma outlined what he described as the likely contours of the Congress-AJP understanding. According to him, the Congress is expected to allot seats such as Binnakandi, Khowang, Barhampur and Sadiya, among others, to the AJP. He further claimed that two seats would be allocated to the CPI(M) and one to the CPI (ML) as part of the broader Opposition arrangement.

However, he noted that negotiations with Rajior Dal have yet to reach a conclusion. "We would wish for them

to also take Rajior Dal with the alliance as well," Sarma said, suggesting that the regional party's inclusion would strengthen the Opposition bloc.

Rajior Dal chief and Sivasagar MP Akhil Gogoi dismissed speculation of a breakdown in ties with the Congress, alleging that rumours of a fallout were being deliberately circulated. "If they (Congress) betray us, it won't be just against our party but the entire state. I am not going to believe in the rumours. Everyone knows that if Congress leaves Rajior Dal, there will be no probability for Congress to secure even one seat in Upper Assam," Gogoi said.

He acknowledged that seat-sharing discussions remain contentious, with disagreements over multiple constituencies. "There is a conflict over a few seats. Right now, a conflict is going on and there have been disagreements over general secretary Alok Nath who has been given Tezpur but we want him from Borsola. Our discussions will

be over if we can deliberate over three seats," Gogoi said. He further claimed that the Dhing constituency had initially been assured to Rajior Dal but that the Congress is now reluctant to concede it. The party has also sought seats in Mahora, Rangiya and Sadiya, among others, though these demands have not been accepted, he added.

Gogoi alleged that the Congress does not intend to allocate any seats to Rajior Dal in the Dhubri constituency and said he had been informed by an Opposition leader that the Congress might attempt to move forward without the regional party. "If Congress takes such a decision, it can be termed as suicidal. I am sure they will not take such a decision. Why would they betray in this way? Discussions are on with us," he said, reiterating that the parties would contest as a united front. Seeking to quell speculation, Assam Pradesh Mahila Congress president Mira Borthakur dismissed reports of

friction within the alliance. Speaking to The Assam Tribune, she denied any move to proceed with seat distribution without Rajior Dal and asserted that the alliance remains intact.

"The news is just circulating across media, but it's not true. We will have an alliance with them," she said, adding that the seat-sharing list would be released shortly. Reports indicate that a final decision may be imminent, with a central meeting of the Congress screening committee currently underway in Delhi. MP Gaurav Gogoi and other party delegates are attending the deliberations. With the ruling BJP closely tracking Opposition negotiations, alliance arithmetic in Upper Assam and other key regions is expected to significantly influence the electoral landscape. As talks continue, the fate of the Congress-Rajior Dal understanding remains uncertain, even as the Congress-AJP deal appears to be nearing completion.

Cherry Blossom Founder Sahoo, received "TIMES FOUNDATION" Distinguished Leadership Honour



BISWADEEP GUPTA

public service, industry, philanthropy, academia and civil society.

Vice President of India C. P. Radhakrishnan was the Chief Guest on the occasion. Several Union Ministers, Members of Parliament, Industry Leaders, Policy makers and Civil Society Members from across the country attended the Summit.

Prof. Sahoo, presently serving as the Chairperson of Research, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Council as well as Head, Department of Botany at University of Delhi is an internationally renowned plant biologist known for his contributions for designing and starting the famous Indian Cherry Blossom Festivals in Shillong, Meghalaya and Manipur in 2016 when he was the Director of Institute of Bioresources and Sustainable Development (IBSD) Government of India, located at Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Sikkim. Prof. Sahoo was the First Indian student to visit Antarctica during 1987-88 in the Indian Government Scientific Expedition to Antarctica. Two new plant species, Prunus dinabandhuana (a cherry blossom species) and Caulokaempferia dinabandhuensis (a ginger species), are named after him because of his scientific contributions.

Gauhati HC Admits Plea Seeking PAF Status for 75,000 Downstream Residents in Dibang Project

ITANAGAR

The Itanagar bench of the Gauhati High Court on Monday admitted a writ petition seeking recognition of downstream communities impacted by the 2,880 MW Dibang Multipurpose Hydro Project as Project Affected Families (PAFs).

The petition, filed on February 13 by Uttama Bor Abor Sanrakshana Sanrachana (UBSS), a registered public charitable trust based in Arunachal Pradesh, seeks formal inclusion of residents from the Lower Dibang Valley in Arunachal Pradesh and the Tinsukia-Sadiya belt of Assam under the PAF category, making them eligible for rehabilitation, compensation and other statutory benefits.

Led by UBSS chairman Bigam Pertin, the petition contends that tens of thousands of downstream residents have been excluded from resettlement and mitigation packages despite documented risks linked to the mega hydropower project.

Pertin claimed that more than 75,000 people face potential threats to their homes, agricultural land and livelihoods due to possible inundation, altered river flow, and flood risks associated with the dam.

"Our case rests on irrefutable facts, constitutional rights, and the lived hardships of

Quest!

When you drink a glass of water, it has already been drunk by other people and animals, possibly several times over.



over 75,000 people whose homes, farmlands, and futures are at stake," Pertin said.

The petition argues that downstream communities should be granted PAF status in light of official acknowledgements that flood and inundation risks could extend up to 63 km downstream from the dam site.

The plea levels multiple allegations against authorities and the project developer, the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC).

Among the key contentions is the alleged arbitrary denial of PAF status to downstream populations, despite impact assessments indicating vulnerability in these areas.

The petition also questions the validity of the 2016 Cumulative Impact Assessment Study, alleging that it excluded the first 45

km downstream stretch - described by the petitioners as the most densely populated zone.

Further, UBSS has alleged that mandatory public hearings were not conducted in the downstream districts of Assam, in violation of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006.

The plea additionally cites failure to obtain free, prior and informed consent from tribal communities as mandated under the Forest Rights Act, 2006, and raises concerns over delays in constructing seismic-resistant embankments and establishing emergency response mechanisms in what is considered a highly seismic region.

The legal move follows a series of protests by the Dibang Multipurpose Hydro Project Downstream Affected Area Com-

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Modi pledges corruption-free governance, vows to end 'six decades of misrule' in letter to Bengal voters



KOLKATA

B Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday wrote to voters in West Bengal, appealing for an opportunity to serve the state ahead of the Assembly elections scheduled in April. In his letter, he outlined his vision for development in Bengal and urged electors to consider the future of the next generation when casting their votes.

Modi highlighted alleged gaps in governance, infrastructure, education, and employment in the state, while detailing plans for further development and benefits under central government schemes. He also referenced the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the initiative "Vikshit Bangla," aimed at fostering growth in the region.

The letter notably did not name the ruling Trinamool Congress or Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, but it criticised what the Prime Minister described as a lack

of development and alleged mismanagement in the state. Opening with "Jai Maa Kali," Modi's message marked a shift from previous party communications in Bengal, which often drew heavily on Ram.

He wrote that the people of Bengal had faced deprivation, saying, "Their pain weighs heavily on my heart. From the depths of my being, I have taken a pledge to develop and transform West Bengal into a prosperous state." Modi invoked the contributions of historical figures such as Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo, while expressing concern that the state had descended into what he described as "narrow vote-bank politics, violence and anarchy."

The Prime Minister urged West Bengal's voters to support development programs already underway in other states, adding that he was seeking one chance to serve the people. He stressed that the direction in which

the state progresses would ultimately be determined by the electorate.

Modi also highlighted the central government's 11-year record, citing initiatives for farmers, youth, and women. He mentioned the construction of 85 lakh toilets under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, loans worth Rs 2.82 lakh crore to small traders and entrepreneurs, 56 lakh beneficiaries under the Atal Pension Yojana, over one crore LPG connections provided under the Ujjwala Yojana, and direct financial assistance under the PM-Kisan Samman Nidhi scheme to more than 52 lakh farmers in West Bengal.

The letter pledged governance free from corruption, promising a state where women could feel secure, youth would not need to migrate for work, and refugees facing religious persecution would receive citizenship through the CAA. Modi also raised concerns about illegal infiltration and alleged misappropriation of central funds in state schemes.

Recalling West Bengal's historical role as a pioneer in industrialisation and a key contributor to India's economy, Modi said he was pained by the state's current condition, attributing challenges to "six decades of misrule and appeasement politics." He noted that unemployment had forced youth to migrate, while women continued to face insecurity. Concluding the letter, Modi invoked the role of Syama Prasad Mookerjee in keeping West Bengal an integral part of India and appealed to voters to participate in shaping the state's future.

NEW DELHI

The Union Government on Monday unveiled the first of its kind uniform anti-terror policy and strategy, 'PRAHAR', while outlining a comprehensive framework to address evolving threats through prevention, coordinated response, capacity building and adherence to the rule of law.

Putting the eight pages policy document in public domain, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) stated that India has remained at the forefront of the global fight against terrorism for decades, even as the nature of threats continues to evolve and that needs to be dealt with firmly.

"While the nature of threats continues to change and present new challenges, India has remained consistently opposed to terrorism in all its forms and manifestations," the MHA document read.

The MHA noted that instability in India's immediate neighbourhood has often created ungoverned spaces and added that "few countries in the region have sometimes used terrorism as an instrument of State Policy."

It also stressed that India does not associate terrorism with any religion or identity and noted that "India does not link terrorism to any specific religion, ethnicity, nationality or civilization" and reaffirmed that the country has always denounced terrorism "unambiguously and unequivocally" and that its policy is guided by a principled approach of 'zero tolerance' against terrorism.

According to the MHA, the counter-terrorism strategy flows from India's long-standing commitment to stand by victims of terrorism and its belief that "there can be no justification whatsoever for violence in the world."

The strategy is predicated on key objectives, including prevention of terror attacks, swift and proportionate responses, aggregation of internal capacities through a whole-of-government approach and ensuring human rights and rule-of-law-based processes

and focused on "attenuating conditions that enable terrorism, aligning international counter-terror efforts and strengthening recovery and resilience through a whole-of-society approach".

The MHA said India has long faced state sponsored terrorism from across the border, with jihadi outfits and their frontal organisations continuing to plan and facilitate attacks. It added that global terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS have attempted to incite violence through sleeper cells.

It also highlighted the growing misuse of technology by terror groups, stating that handlers frequently use "the latest technologies, including the use of drones, for facilitating terror-related activities and executing attacks in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir". The terror outfits are increasingly relying on social media platforms and instant messaging applications for propaganda, recruitment and communication, while technologies such as encryption, the dark web and crypto wallets enable anonymous operations,

it added.

It also expressed concerns over attempts by terror outfits to have access of Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, Explosive and Digital (CBRNE) materials, alongside cyber-attacks carried out by criminal hackers and nation states.

Talking about a proactive and intelligence-guided approach to counter terrorism, the MHA said, "The Multi Agency Centre (MAC) and Joint Task Force on Intelligence (JTFI) within the Intelligence Bureau serve as nodal platforms for real-time intelligence sharing and coordinated action."

Law enforcement agencies would continue their efforts in countering the misuse of the internet, recruitment networks and logistical support systems, including overground worker (OGW) modules, it noted, while adding that special emphasis is to be given for disrupting terror funding networks through legal mechanisms.

It said that border guarding forces and immigration authorities have

been equipped with advanced technologies to secure threats across land, air and water, while critical sectors such as power, aviation, ports, defence and atomic energy are being protected from state and non-state actors.

Noting that local police remain the first responders during terror incidents, supported by specialised state and central forces, the MHA said, "The National Security Guard (NSG) functions as the nodal national counter-terror force, assisting states and conducting capacity-building initiatives. And then, a probe by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) and state police agencies, coupled with high prosecution rates, are aimed at creating deterrence against future terror incidents."

Giving special emphasis on countering radicalization, the MHA said, "Intelligence and law enforcement agencies should adopt graded responses to address violent extremism, while community leaders, NGOs and moderate preachers are engaged to spread awareness about the consequences of extremist violence. Efforts are also being undertaken to prevent radicalisation in prisons and to address socio-economic vulnerabilities through education, employment and welfare initiatives aimed at youth and women."

Highlighting the transnational nature of terrorism, the MHA said international partnerships remain critical through intelligence sharing, extradition arrangements and cooperation frameworks. India will continue working with global partners to designate terrorists and build consensus on counter-terror measures, it added.

MHA in the policy document stressed on the need for enhanced cooperation among agencies, periodic legal reforms and enhanced capacity building of state counter-terror units, as the strategy aims to deny terrorists access to funds, weapons and safe havens while investing in technology and partnerships to counter future threats.

Mexico has deployed 10,000 troops to quell clashes sparked by the killing of the country's most-wanted drug lord, officials said Monday.

Nemesio "El Mencho" Oseguera, leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), was wounded Sunday in a shootout with soldiers in the town of Tapalpa, in Jalisco state, and died while being flown to Mexico City, the army said.

News of his death triggered spasms of violence, with cartel members blocking roads in 20 states and torching vehicles and businesses.

During the raid on Oseguera and subsequent clashes, at least 27 members of security forces, 46 suspected criminals and one civilian were killed, authorities reported.

A prison break in Jalisco saw at least 23 people escape when their jail was attacked in a hail of gunfire by "criminal groups," according to the state security secretary.

Oseguera had a \$15 million US bounty on his head.

Fearful residents went into hiding and tourists took shelter in their hotels as cartel members went on the rampage over the weekend.

Even as calm largely returned, many businesses remained closed Monday.

The government sent an additional 2,500 troops to Jalisco - one of the host cities in this year's FIFA World Cup

the now-imprisoned Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman and Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, of the rival Sinaloa cartel.

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With his son Ruben "El Menchito" Oseguera Gonzalez, 35, convicted by a federal jury in Washington in September, experts have warned the "absence of a direct succession" could lead to a power vacuum.

A soldier clears a roadblock on a road leading to Tapalpa, Mexico, Monday, Feb. 23, 2026, a day after the Mexican army killed Jalisco New Generation Cartel leader Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, known as "El Mencho."

Mexico said the operation to seize Oseguera was helped by "complementary information" from US authorities.

White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt confirmed that Washington "provided intelligence support." President Claudia Sheinbaum was adamant that no US forces took part in the capture raid. Key to locating Oseguera was one of his girlfriends, Mexican Defense Secretary Ricardo Trevilla said.

Mexican intelligence, supported by the US military, learned of a rendezvous between the woman and the drug lord and used that information to track him to a ranch in Jalisco state, Trevilla told reporters.

Pharmacies were closed and nearly "everything is closed," Juan Soler, a retiree from Guadalajara, told AFP.

"I couldn't sleep," Maria de Jesus Gonzalez said. "Now I'm a little more calm, but a little afraid, still."

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The weekend violence also gripped the resort city of Puerto Vallarta, popular with US tourists. Travel warnings from Britain, Canada and the United States were issued in the fallout, with Australia urging citizens to "exercise a degree of caution."

Oseguera, 59, was considered the last of the drug lords who acted in the brutal mold of

the now-imprisoned Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman and Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, of the rival Sinaloa cartel.

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From Conflict to the World Stage: How Boong Turned a BAFTA Win into a Call for Manipur's Children



When a small Manipuri-language film walked away with one of British cinema's most prestigious honours, it did more than upstage global studio giants. It reframed a conversation.

On February 22, 2026, at London's Royal Festival Hall, Boong clinched the Best Children's & Family Film prize at the EE BAFTA Film Awards, surpassing heavyweight international contenders including Lilo & Stitch and Zootopia 2 (marketed in some territories as Zootropolis 2). For an industry accustomed to the gravitational pull of Hollywood, the moment was startling. For Manipur, it was something far deeper.

This was not just an award. It was a microphone.

Written and directed by debut filmmaker Lakshmi Priya Devi, and backed by Excel Entertainment—the production house co-founded by Farhan Akhtar and Ritesh Sidhwani—Boong is, on the surface, a tender coming-of-age comedy-drama. It follows a spirited schoolboy on a whimsical quest to reunite his fractured family.

But beneath its humour and warmth lies a portrait of a state bruised by ethnic tensions, displacement, and grief.

Manipur, in India's Northeast, has in recent years endured prolonged conflict between communities, leading to loss of life, deep mistrust, and the displacement of thousands. The political complexities—land rights, identity, affirmative action policies, and historical grievances—are often reduced to brief headlines outside the region. Rarely do the stories of children living in relief camps, or mothers rebuilding homes from scratch, command sustained international attention.

Until now.

If the award brought applause, it was Lakshmi Priya Devi's acceptance speech that stilled the room.

Opening with a soft "Khurumjari"—a traditional Manipuri greeting—she thanked the British Academy and then redirected the spotlight away from herself.

"The walk up till here felt like the last few steps to reach a summit of a mountain we never knew we were climbing," she said, before turning to what truly mattered: "We pray for peace to return to Manipur. We pray that all the internally displaced children, including the child actors in the film, regain their joy, their innocence and their dreams once again. We pray that no conflict

is ever formidable



Successful people start with two core beliefs: the future can be better than the present, and I have the power to make it so.

is enough to destroy the one superpower that all of us have as human beings - that is forgiveness."

The line lingered long after the applause.

In a ceremony known for culture and celebrity, Devi's words cut through the glamour. She did not cite box office numbers. She did not speak of distribution deals. She spoke of displaced children.

In doing so, she transformed a glittering global stage into a quiet plea for reconciliation.

At the heart of Boong is its young protagonist, played with remarkable naturalism by child actor Gugun Kipgen. In a detail that adds emotional gravity to the film's reception, Gugun himself comes from a community affected by displacement. His performance carries a lived authenticity that no rehearsal could replicate.

The character's journey—from Imphal's valley to the border town of Moreh, with wistful glimpses across into Myanmar—is framed as an adventure. He wants to bring his absent father home as a surprise for his mother. It is a child's logic, pure and hopeful.

Yet along the way, the audience encounters subtle markers of fracture: checkpoints, whispered anxieties, economic hardship, cultural divides. None are foregrounded with heavy exposition. They simply exist, as they do in daily life.

The genius of Boong lies in its refusal to sensationalise. Conflict is not spectacle here; it is back-

ground hum. The foreground belongs to laughter, friendship, and stubborn optimism.

Perhaps the most quietly radical element of Boong is its portrayal of everyday pluralism.

The film depicts a Manipur where Meitei, Kuki, and Naga communities interact in markets, schools, and neighbourhoods without suspicion. Migrant families—Tamil, Nepali, Marwari—add to the cultural mosaic. Children form friendships oblivious to inherited divides.

Boong's closest companion, Raju, comes from a Marwari migrant family. Their mischief, loyalty, and shared secrets underscore a simple truth: prejudice is learned; harmony is instinctive.

Set in a period before the 2023 escalation of violence that deepened ethnic fissures, the film functions almost as a cinematic memory. It recalls a time when coexistence was ordinary, not aspirational.

In today's context, that memory feels both nostalgic and urgent.

International audiences often encounter Manipur through numbers: casualties, displaced families, relief camp populations. Statistics convey scale but rarely emotion.

By telling its story through a child's perspective, Boong reclaims narrative agency. Displacement becomes not

an abstract humanitarian category but a lived interruption—schools closed, birthdays muted, playgrounds replaced by uncertainty.

The film does not preach. It does not assign blame. Instead, it humanises.

In the BAFTA hall, surrounded by global cinema's elite, Devi's invocation of forgiveness was not naive idealism. It was strategic empathy. She reframed Manipur not as a distant conflict zone but as a community yearning for restoration.

Awards can be symbolic, but symbolism has power.

For Indian cinema, the win marks a milestone: Boong is the first Indian film to secure this particular BAFTA category. For regional filmmakers in the North-east—long overshadowed by mainstream Hindi and southern industries—it signals possibility.

For displaced families in Manipur, the symbolism is more intimate. In relief camps where daily routines revolve around survival, the knowledge that a story rooted in their landscape resonated on an international stage carries emotional weight.

Visibility can catalyse attention—from journalists, policymakers, humanitarian organisations. It can challenge reductive narratives that paint the region solely through the lens of violence.

And it can instil pride.

Lakshmi Priya Devi has noted in interviews that screenings in cities like Delhi and Bengaluru have drawn audiences from different Manipuri communities who laughed and applauded together.

In divided societies, shared cultural experiences matter. Watching the same film, responding to the same humour, wiping away the same tears—these are small but significant acts of collective recognition.

Boong does not claim to solve structural grievances. But it models a different emotional vocabulary: tenderness over anger, curiosity over suspicion.

In that sense, the BAFTA win amplifies not only a film but a philosophy.

There is, of course, a danger in romanticising recognition. Awards do not rebuild homes. Applause does not erase trauma.

But they can shift perception.

For too long, narratives about India's Northeast have struggled for sustained national and global engagement. When they do surface,

it is often in moments of crisis. Boong offers an alternative entry point: art.

By centring children and foregrounding everyday humanity, the film invites audiences to see Manipur not as an anomaly but as a place of layered identities, humour, and resilience.

In her closing words at the BAFTAs, Devi thanked the academy "for giving us not only an award but this stage to express our hope."

That distinction matters. The trophy will gather dust on a shelf. The stage—fleeting as it was—created an archive of testimony. It ensured that, for a few minutes, the global film industry listened to a plea for peace from a state often marginalised in national discourse.

Will international distributors bring Boong to wider audiences? Will policymakers and civil society actors leverage the renewed attention to push for dialogue? Will the film's message of forgiveness find resonance within communities still nursing fresh wounds? These questions remain open.

What is clear is that on one winter evening in London, a small film from Manipur reframed victory. It demonstrated that children's cinema can carry political weight without losing gentleness. That humour can coexist with grief.

That a regional language story can eclipse global franchises when it speaks with authenticity.

And that sometimes, the most powerful acceptance speech is not about achievement, but about appeal.

In relief camps and hillside villages, in the valleys and border towns, many still wait for normalcy. For classrooms to feel safe again. For friendships to resume without fear. For the word "home" to regain its simplicity.

Boong cannot deliver that alone.

But by turning a BAFTA into a bridge—between local pain and global empathy—it has offered something rare: recognition without exploitation, visibility without spectacle. In doing so, it has reminded the world that behind every conflict headline are children who deserve laughter, families who deserve reunion, and communities who deserve the chance to forgive.

The award was historic. The message was urgent.

And for Manipur, the stage may prove more lasting than the spotlight.



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