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PERSPECTIVE
If you had an extra hour every day, what would you do?

Assam Emerges Among Northeast's Better Performers in School Education

GUWAHATI
Assam has emerged as one of the stronger performers in school education in the Northeast, while Meghalaya ranked as the weakest-performing state in the country, according to the Performance Grading Index (PGI) 2.0 report for 2024-25 released by the Union Ministry of Education. Assam scored 593.6 out of 1,000 and secured a Prachesta-3 grade, recording one of the sharpest improvements in the country by gaining more than 82 points from its previous score of 511.5 in 2023-24. Meghalaya, meanwhile, scored 448 points, placing it in the Akanshi-3 band, the lowest category in the index. The state also recorded the lowest overall score among all states in India. The report highlighted stark differences between the two neighbouring states across governance, infrastructure and learning outcomes. Assam secured an Uttam-3 grade in governance, placing it alongside leading performers such as Maharashtra, Chandigarh and Odisha. Meghalaya, however, scored only 40.5 out of 130 in the governance category. In learning outcomes - considered the most significant component of the index with a weightage of 240 marks - Assam scored 79.4, while Meghalaya recorded 47.2, the lowest among northeastern states. Meghalaya also posted weak scores in infrastructure and teacher training. The state scored 62.1 out of 190 in infrastructure and 46.7 out of 100 in teacher education and training. Though Meghalaya improved by around 30 points from its 2023-24 score of 417.9, the increase was the smallest in the Northeast region.

WHO SAID WHAT

President Trump called me tonight. He had a clear message: 'I love Prime Minister Modi, We've never been closer to India. I'm fan Prime Minister Modi' Ambassador Sergio Gor, U.S. Ambassador to India

Assam's Sex Ratio at Birth Improves to 946, Surpasses National Average

GUWAHATI
Assam has recorded significant improvement in its sex ratio at birth, with the state registering 946 female births per 1,000 male births during 2022-24, surpassing the national average of 918, according to recently released Central government data. The figures show that the sex ratio at birth in Assam stood at 943 in rural areas and 971 in urban areas during the three-year period. The state had earlier recorded a sex ratio at birth of 938 during 2021-23, including 936 in rural areas and 961 in urban regions, indicating a steady improvement across both rural and urban Assam. Among states, Chhattisgarh recorded the highest sex ratio at birth at 978 females per 1,000 males, followed by Kerala at 974, while Uttarakhand registered the lowest ratio at 872. The report also highlighted progress in fertility indicators in Assam. The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) in the state declined to 1.9 in 2024 from 2.2 in 2018, matching the national average. The TFR in rural Assam stood at 2.1 in 2024, while urban Assam recorded a significantly lower figure of 1.3.



Data showed that Assam's TFR had remained at 2.2 in 2018 and 2019 before declining to 2.1 in 2020. It remained unchanged for the next two years before dropping to 2.0 in 2023 and further to 1.9 in 2024. In rural Assam, the TFR declined from 2.4 in 2018 to 2.1 in 2024, while urban TFR decreased from 1.6 to 1.3 during the same period. At the national level, Bihar recorded the highest TFR at 2.9, while Delhi reported the lowest at 1.2. The report noted that India's overall TFR has now fallen below the replacement level of 2.1, with several states and Union Territories also recording fertility rates below replacement level, including

MANIPUR FLAGGED OVER 5,400 COMMUNAL SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS SINCE 2023: DGP RAJIV SINGH Manipur CM Yumnam Flags Off 477 New Police Vehicles

IMPHAL
Outgoing Director General of Police Rajiv Singh on Monday said Manipur Police had identified 5,406 sensitive, violent and communal social media posts since June 2023, of which nearly 3,200 posts were taken down and 187 pages and accounts blocked in coordination with the state IT Department and the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY). Addressing a programme at the 1st Manipur Rifles Ground in Imphal, the DGP said the action formed part of the state's broader effort to curb misinformation and maintain public order in the aftermath of the ethnic violence that erupted in May 2023. The event also witnessed Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh flagging off 477 new police vehicles, including armoured vehicles and two-wheelers, for the Manipur Police force. "Since June 1, 2023, a total of 5,406 sensitive, violent and communal posts were identified, and around 3,200 posts were taken down in coordination with the state IT Department and MeitY. A total of 187 pages and accounts were also blocked," Rajiv Singh said. He stressed the importance of monitoring and verification of fake news and misinformation to ensure public order and communal harmony in the state. The DGP also said the social media outreach of Manipur Police had expanded significantly during the period, with the department's Facebook following increasing to 79,000 and



followers on X reaching 27,000. Recalling the circumstances under which he assumed office in June 2023, Rajiv Singh said the state was going through one of the most challenging periods in its history due to violence between two communities. "The situation demanded not only an immediate operational response but also long-term institutional strengthening of the police force," he said. According to the DGP, a comprehensive police modernisation plan was prepared and submitted to the state government towards the end of 2023. He added that the Ministry of Home Affairs sanctioned Rs 136.61 crore on October 31, 2025, for strengthening security infrastructure, mobility, forensic capabilities, communication systems and smart policing initiatives in the state. Appealing for continued public support, Rajiv Singh urged citizens to cooperate with security forces in restoring peace and stability in Manipur. Meanwhile, Mukesh Singh, a 1996-batch IPS officer of the AGMUT cadre, is set to take charge as the next Director General of Police of Manipur on May 30 after the Centre approved his inter-cadre deputation in public interest. Manipur Police on Monday inducted 477 new vehicles, including bulletproof vehicles, under the Centre's police modernisation scheme to strengthen mobility, operational preparedness and security response across the state. The vehicles were flagged off during a ceremony held at the 1st Battalion Manipur Rifles Parade Ground in the presence of Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh, Home Minister K. Govindas Singh, senior police officials and security personnel. Describing the induction as a major boost to policing and security operations, Home Minister Govindas Singh said mobility constraints had long hampered the functioning of security forces, particularly in the hill districts.

"This event is very significant because mobility was lacking particularly in the hill areas," he said, adding that nearly 54 per cent of the newly inducted vehicles would be deployed in hill districts. The Home Minister further stated that the government was planning to procure more sophisticated weapons and advanced equipment as part of its broader police modernisation initiative. "We are going to procure more sophisticated weapons; not only firearms, but also more equipment for cybercrime-related cases and other requirements," he said. He added that the state government was also working to address shortages of modern equipment and manpower within the police department. Addressing the gathering, Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh praised the role of Manipur Police during the ongoing unrest in the state and said the force had played a crucial role in protecting lives and property while helping

restore law and order following the outbreak of ethnic violence in May 2023. The Chief Minister expressed confidence that the induction of new vehicles and modern equipment would improve the operational efficiency and response capabilities of Manipur Police across both valley and hill districts. Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of the event, outgoing Director General of Police Rajiv Singh said the new fleet would significantly strengthen the operational capabilities of the police force. He noted that the vehicles had been distributed keeping in mind the operational requirements of vulnerable and remote areas, while bulletproof vehicles were included in view of previous ambush incidents involving security personnel. "We needed bulletproof vehicles also. Those have been catered to here, and we are hopeful that our police strength and operational capacity will be significantly improved," he said. Reflecting on his tenure in Manipur, Rajiv Singh described his experience in the state as "beautiful" and commended the professionalism and dedication shown by Manipur Police during one of the most challenging phases in the state's recent history. Meanwhile, Mukesh Singh, a 1996-batch IPS officer of the AGMUT cadre, is scheduled to take charge as the next Director General of Police of Manipur on May 30 after the Centre approved his inter-cadre deputation as a special case in public interest.

Assam UCC Bill Proposes Uniform Marriage Laws, Mandatory Registration of Live-in Relationships

GUWAHATI
The Assam Legislative Assembly on Monday introduced the "Uniform Civil Code, Assam, Bill, 2026," proposing a common civil framework governing marriage, divorce, succession and live-in relationships across the state, while exempting Scheduled Tribes to preserve constitutional safeguards and customary practices. The Bill was introduced on the third day of the ongoing 16th session of the Assembly by Parliamentary Affairs Minister Atul Bora on behalf of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. The proposed legislation seeks to replace religion-based personal laws with a unified civil framework aimed at ensuring legal uniformity, gender justice and equality before the law, while allowing marriages to continue under existing religious customs and traditional ceremonies. Under the proposed law, monogamy would become mandatory, while the legal age of marriage would remain standardised at 21 years for men and 18 years for women. The Bill permits marriages to be solemnised through recognised religious and customary ceremonies, including Vedic Bibah, Ahom Chaklong, Saptapadi, Ashirvad, Nikah, Holy Union and Anand Karaj. To ensure transparency and legal accountability, registration of all marriages and divorces would be compulsory. Couples would be required to submit a marriage memorandum to the Sub-Registrar within 60 days of solemnisation. The legislation also introduces uniform grounds for divorce, including cruelty, desertion and mutual consent. It further provides that custody of children below five years of age would ordinarily remain with the mother during early childhood. The Bill establishes a uniform and gender-neutral order of succession for intestate property among Class-1 heirs,

including spouses, children and parents of the deceased. It also grants every adult of sound mind the right to execute a written and witnessed Will for testamentary succession. One of the key provisions of the Bill is the regulation of live-in relationships through compulsory registration within one month of commencement of such relationships. Children born out of live-in relationships would be recognised as legitimate under the proposed law. The legislation also allows deserted live-in partners to seek financial maintenance through courts. According to the state government, the provisions are intended to provide legal protection to vulnerable individuals, particularly women, while ensuring accountability in evolving family structures. The Bill proposes stringent penalties for violations relating to marriage, divorce and live-in relationships. Bigamy and polygamy would attract imprisonment of up to seven years and a fine of Rs 50,000. Child marriage and marriage without valid consent would invite punishment under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, including imprisonment of up to two years, fines, or both. Fraudulent marriages involving force, coercion or concealment of facts could attract imprisonment of up to seven years along with fines. Illegal dissolution of marriage or violation of lawful divorce procedures would be punishable with imprisonment of up to three years and fines. Forcing a divorced individual to fulfil unlawful conditions before remarriage could attract imprisonment of up to three years and a penalty of Rs 1 lakh. Marriage within prohibited relationships, unless permitted by valid customs, would carry imprisonment of up to six months and a fine of up to Rs 50,000.

Naga and Meitei Groups Hold Joint Protest in Imphal Demanding Rescue of Six Hostages

IMPHAL
Thousands of people from Naga and Meitei communities staged a joint protest rally in Imphal on Monday, demanding the immediate rescue of six Naga civilians who were allegedly abducted and have reportedly remained in captivity for more than a week. The protest was organised under the banner of the Naga People's Union Imphal and witnessed participation from various indigenous Naga and Meitei groups, many of whom wore traditional attire during the demonstration. The rally began from Tribal Market in Imphal and proceeded towards the Chief Minister's Secretariat, where protesters intended to submit a memorandum to the state government. However, security personnel stopped the procession at Palace Compound near the Thangal General Statue. Later, six representatives of the Naga People's Union Imphal were allowed to meet Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh and submit their memorandum. A large contingent of central and state security forces was deployed in the area to maintain law and order during the protest. Demonstrators remained gathered at Palace Compound until the representatives returned from the Secretariat. Protesters raised slogans demanding the immediate rescue of the six civilians and stronger action against armed groups allegedly involved in the incident. Addressing the media, a secretary of the Naga People's Union Imphal alleged that the six civilians were being held captive by Kuki militants from Leiton Vaiphei and had not been released despite more than a week having passed. He said the incident had caused deep concern among indigenous communities and described the protest as a peaceful democratic movement seeking urgent government intervention for the safe release of the hostages.

Assam BJP to honour 82 newly-elected MLAs at Guwahati event on May 26



GUWAHATI
Bharatiya Janata Party's Assam unit will facilitate its 82 newly-elected MLAs at a grand programme in Guwahati on May 26 following the party's victory in the 2026 Assam Assembly elections. The felicitation ceremony will be held at the Srimanta Sankardev International Auditorium at 6 pm. Ahead of the event, the party will convene a special organisational meeting from 10 am at the Sri Sri Damodardev Auditorium in the presence of district and mandal presidents from across the state. According to a statement issued by the Assam Pradesh BJP headquarters, the party will also honour presidents of all 39 organisational districts and 433 mandals for their role in securing the BJP's third consecutive electoral victory in the state.

Party spokesperson Pranjal Kalita said the BJP's emphatic mandate in the 2026 Assembly elections was the result of sustained efforts by grassroots workers and organisational leaders across Assam. He said nearly 65 lakh party members and around 72,000 active karyakartas working across 31,486 polling booths played a key role in the party's electoral success. Kalita further stated that compared to the 2021 Assembly elections, the BJP increased its vote share by nearly five percentage points and secured around 38 per cent of the total votes polled in the 2026 elections. According to the party, the programme has been planned not only to felicitate the newly-elected legislators but also to recognise the organisational strength, commitment and contribution of district and mandal-level leaders in expanding the BJP's grassroots network in Assam. The event is expected to be attended by Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, State BJP President Dilip Saikia, Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal, Union Minister of State Pabitra Margherita and other senior BJP leaders, MPs, former MLAs and party workers from across the state.

Tripura High Court Directs State to Form Prison Reform Monitoring Panel by June 15

AGARTALA
The High Court of Tripura has directed the state government to constitute a State Level Monitoring Committee by June 15 to review prison conditions, assess the functioning of Open Correctional Institutions (OCIs), and examine facilities available for differently-abled inmates in correctional homes across the state. A division bench comprising Chief Justice M. S. Ramachandra Rao and Justice Biswajit Palit issued the directive while hearing a suo motu writ petition initiated in compliance with a recent order of the Supreme Court of India on prison reforms. The court observed that while the process for forming the committee had already begun, the panel had not yet been formally constituted. The state government was instructed to complete all required formalities and make the committee operational by June 15, 2026. The bench further directed the committee to submit quarterly status reports beginning August 21, 2026. The order follows a February 2026 judgment of the Supreme Court, which called upon all states and Union Territories to strengthen and expand Open Correctional Institutions as part of a broader policy aimed at ensuring humane prison reforms. The apex court had emphasised that prison administration must uphold constitutional guarantees under Articles 14, 15 and 21, while observing that open prisons play an important role in rehabilitation, social reintegration and reducing overcrowding in conventional jails. The Supreme Court had also expressed concern over the poor implementation of OCIs in several states, particularly the exclusion of women prisoners from such facilities. It additionally stressed the need for safeguards and improved living conditions for inmates with disabilities. The matter originally arose from a petition concerning overcrowding and humane prison conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic before expanding into a broader examination of prison reforms across the country.

Assam. The Gross Reproduction Rate (GRR) in Assam was recorded at 1 in 2024, while the national average stood at 0.9. The report further stated that institutional deliveries remained high in Assam. In 2024, around 85.7 per cent of deliveries in the state took place in government hospitals, including 87.3 per cent in rural areas and 73.2 per cent in urban regions. An additional 8.7 per cent of deliveries occurred in private hospitals, with the share higher in urban areas at 25.7 per cent compared to 6.6 per cent in rural Assam. The General Fertility Rate (GFR) in Assam stood at 65.5 overall, including 69.6 in rural areas and 43.6 in urban areas, while the Crude Birth Rate was recorded at 19.6 against the national average of 18.3. The report also showed variations in fertility rates based on women's educational attainment. Illiterate women in Assam recorded a TFR of 2.8 in 2024, while women educated up to Class 10 had a TFR of 1.5. Women who were graduates and above recorded a TFR of 1.7. The data reflects a broader demographic transition in Assam, with improvements in gender balance at birth and a continuing decline in fertility rates across the state.



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HORMUZ CRISIS BIG TEST FOR CHINA

The crisis triggered by the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz is rapidly shifting from the military sphere to one dominated by pricing pressures, insurance costs, ship availability, delivery schedules, energy contracts, and the ability of industries to sustain production. For the People's Republic of China, the blockade represents a major test of its vast industrial and energy system, carefully built in recent years to withstand external shocks. It has invested heavily in strategic reserves, coal production, domestic mining, imports from Russia and Central Asia, electrification of transport, renewable energy, nuclear power, expansion of the national grid, and strong state control over key enterprises.

Beijing is approaching the Hormuz crisis from the perspective of a country that has learned over the years that energy is a component of national security. The Chinese authorities do not treat oil, gas, and electricity solely as market categories. They are elements of social stability, industrial competitiveness, mobilisation capacity, and political autonomy from the West. Therefore, China's energy transformation has two parallel meanings: a climate-industrial one and a strategic one.

Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) describes it as a process of "shock-proofing," or securing the system against external instability. According to this analysis, China achieved approximately 85% energy self-sufficiency by 2024, and its investments in green technologies, electrification, diversification of fossil fuel imports, and expansion of coal-fired capacity increased the country's resilience to the shocks caused by the war with Iran and the closure of Hormuz.

Administrative data from Beijing demonstrates why this system is more difficult to disrupt than the economies of smaller Asian importers. China's National Bureau of Statistics reported that in 2024, industrial enterprises above a certain size extracted 4.76 billion tonnes of coal, while importing 540 million tonnes. In the same year, domestic oil production reached 212.82 million tonnes, oil imports 553.42 million tonnes, gas production 246.4 billion cubic meters, and gas imports 131.69 million tonnes. Electricity production reached 9.4181 trillion kWh. These figures do not eliminate import dependence, but they do illustrate the scale of China's own energy and industrial base.

When it comes to oil, China remains strongly linked to the Middle East. The Columbia Center on Global Energy Policy, based on Chinese customs and industry data, estimates that in 2025, about half of China's oil imports and almost a third of its LNG imports would come from the Middle East. Official customs data indicate that 42% of China's oil imports came from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the UAE, Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar. Additionally, oil imports from Iran must be taken into account. Since 2022, these imports have not been included in official Chinese statistics, but according to tanker tracking data (Kpler), they reached approximately 1.38 million barrels per day in 2025 and were often declared as Malaysian or Indonesian oil.

China's resilience to an oil shock has several layers. The first is its inventories. The CGEP reports that at the beginning of March, China had approximately 1.39 billion barrels of crude oil in storage, equivalent to approximately 120 days of net imports at 2025 levels. The second layer consists of Iranian barrels held in floating storage facilities in Asia and bonded warehouses in China. The third layer consists of Russian supplies and alternative import sources. The fourth is the state's administrative capacity to manage refineries, fuel exports, margins, and raw material allocation.

Liquefied natural gas is China's weaker point. Oil has greater market liquidity, broader reserves, and greater potential for short-term substitution. LNG requires specific infrastructure, contracts, terminals, ships, and regasification. In the event of a disruption in LNG supplies from Qatar and UAE, Beijing has a limited range of actions: it can limit demand or pay more for alternative cargoes. The first option seems closer to China's crisis management approach, especially given weak domestic demand and the reluctance of state-owned companies to accept extremely high spot prices.

This point requires further attention in the industry analysis. The crisis in Hormuz isn't affecting China solely through energy imports for households. It's most severely impacting refineries, petrochemicals, fertilizers, maritime transport, chemical industry, plastics production, and sectors dependent on stable energy prices.

China's advantage lies in the existence of systemic buffers: coal, domestic electricity, massive renewable energy capacity, battery production, transport electrification, and the ability to shift costs between state-owned enterprises, the budget, and consumers. The weakness lies in the fact that an economy as large as China's cannot simply "escape" oil. Even the most aggressive electrification doesn't replace petrochemicals, aviation, heavy transport, fertilizers, and parts of industrial processes.

It's worth understanding China's energy policy as a policy of excess. Beijing isn't choosing a single source of security. It's simultaneously building coal, renewable energy, nuclear power, gas pipelines, LNG, oil reserves, transport electrification, and its own energy storage technologies. From the perspective of the European climate debate, this appears inconsistent. From the perspective of a country preparing for a world of sanctions, blockades, and maritime crises, it's coherent enough. China wants to be able to shift from one buffer to another, even at the cost of higher emissions and inefficiency.

China's official response was predictable. Beijing portrayed the crisis as a result of military escalation and called for the restoration of peace and the protection of civilian shipping. The Sino-Pakistani Five-Point Initiative dedicated a separate section to the Strait of Hormuz. China and Pakistan called for the protection of crews and ships, the safe passage of civilian and commercial vessels, and the rapid restoration of normal navigation.

This language serves several purposes. First, Beijing wants to portray itself as a defender of trade and energy stability. Second, it wants to avoid the impression that it benefits from Western-provided security without taking responsibility for it. Third, it attempts to speak on behalf of importers from Asia and the Global South, for whom rising energy prices are a real fiscal and social problem. Fourth, it maintains its distance from any naval operation that might appear to be a US-led coalition.

This is a weak point in China's position. China requires free navigation through the Strait of Hormuz, Malacca, the Arabian Sea, and Indian Ocean, but its ability to independently stabilise these routes is limited politically and operationally. The Chinese navy is expanding its reach, with a base in Djibouti, anti-piracy expertise, and a growing ocean presence, but Beijing is reluctant to assume the role of guarantor of maritime order in the Persian Gulf. Such a role would require decisions that would be inconsistent with China's image of a nation that avoids foreign wars.

Beijing may attempt to exploit the Strait of Hormuz for propaganda purposes. Its message is predictable: a US-led security order breeds war and chaos; China offers stability, trade, and infrastructure. This message will appeal to audiences who already view Western security architecture with distrust.

For Beijing, Hormuz is a vindication of its policy of building surplus: reserves, alternative supplies, domestic mining, coal, renewable energy, nuclear power, electrification, and state control over strategic sectors. This model is costly and inefficient from a pure economic perspective, but in a crisis, it buys China time. And in such a scenario, time is as valuable a resource as oil.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

To the world you may be one person, but to one person you may be the world. - Dr. Seuss

HOW A RS 1 MELODY TOFFEE BECAME INDIA'S SWEETEST SOFT-POWER GIFT



T N ASHOK

The gift wrapped Melody chocolate seemed to sing a new jingle: "Jab Melody hain, to Meloni hain" to soft power India's diplomatic thrust into a country where a saint was crucified and a great new religion was born that swept the world with millions of followers governed by the smallest country within another country — the Vatican. In the often stiff and scripted world of diplomacy, it took a humble Indian caramel toffee to melt the internet.

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni during his state visit to Italy this week, few expected the biggest diplomatic headline to revolve around a packet of Melody toffees. Yet that is exactly what happened when Modi handed Meloni the iconic Indian candy in a playful nod to the viral "Melodi" nickname coined by social media users blending their surnames.

Meloni, smiling broadly in a video she later posted online, declared: "Prime Minister Modi brought us a gift... a very, very good toffee." Modi then revealed the punchline: "Melody." Both leaders burst into laughter. Meloni captioned the clip simply: "Thank you for the gift."

The internet exploded instantly. For millions of Indians born in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, particularly the millennials who are far too familiar with the toffee having devoured its caramel, Melody was never merely candy. It was nostalgia wrapped in golden-brown paper — the prized reward after school, the treasure hidden in grandmother's jars, the sweet bought with leftover pocket money. Suddenly, this little caramel-chocolate confection found itself elevated from neighbourhood Kirana (tuck shops) shelves to the grand theatre of international diplomacy.

And just like that, Melody was back. Melody was launched in 1983 by Parle Products, the Mumbai-based FMCG giant best known globally for Parle-G biscuits. The company introduced Melody as a caramel-coated chocolate-filled toffee at a time when India's confectionery market was dominated by hard candies and glucose sweets.

Its genius lay in contrast: chewy caramel outside, molten chocolate inside. Soon came the unforgetta-

ble advertising slogan: "Melody itni chocolaty kyun hai?" (why is melody so chocolaty?) The line entered Indian pop culture and stayed there for decades.

Parle cleverly positioned Melody as an affordable indulgence. At a price point that even schoolchildren could afford, it became one of India's best-selling toffees through the late 1980s and 1990s. Melody's rise coincided with India's expanding television culture, and aggressive advertising helped it become a household name across urban and rural India alike.

By the mid-1990s, Melody was reportedly among India's top-selling confectionery products, especially in the loose-candy segment sold through small grocery shops and roadside kiosks. Industry estimates from that era suggest Parle's confectionery business was selling billions of units annually, with Melody among its flagship brands.

Then how did such a popular candy suddenly disappear from the shelves of retailers — the law of averages caught up with it, huh, changing tastes of the new Gen Z. Yet somewhere in the 2000s, Melody slowly disappeared from supermarket prominence.

It never truly vanished — the toffee continued to exist in smaller retail circuits — but it lost visibility as India's confectionery landscape changed dramatically. Global brands entered aggressively after economic liberalisation. Chocolates became aspirational. Consumers shifted from ?1 toffees to premium chocolate bars, wafers, gums and imported candies.

The neighbourhood grocery counter itself evolved. Modern retail chains preferred products with sleek packaging and higher profit margins. Melody, still deeply associated with old-school nostalgia, found itself overshadowed by shinier competitors. Younger consumers migrated toward brands pushed heavily through television and digital marketing.

Ironically, Melody's biggest strength — its timeless simplicity — also made it seem dated in a rapidly globalising India. But nostalgia never truly dies in India. It merely waits for a trigger.

That trigger arrived in Rome. Modi's "Melodi" Masterstroke. What made Modi's gesture politically fascinating was its layered symbolism. It was funny, culturally rooted, internet-savvy and emotionally intelligent all at once.

Instead of gifting expensive handicrafts or ceremonial artefacts, he chose something every Indian instantly recognised. A ?1 toffee became a diplomatic meme.

Social media users called it "the greatest accidental brand endorsement in Indian history." Others joked that no advertising agency could have purchased publicity of this scale. Reddit users described the moment as "peak dad-joke diplomacy."

Even Parle joined the frenzy, reposting the video with the cheeky line: "Sweetening relationships since 1983." The timing could not have been better for the brand. Within hours, searches for Melody surged online. Retailers reported renewed curiosity. Memes flooded Instagram and X. Younger Indians who had never tasted Melody suddenly wanted to know what the fuss was about.

Perhaps most importantly, international audiences were introduced to an Indian confectionery icon in the most organic way possible — not through advertising, but through a moment of human warmth between two world leaders.

Unlike Parle-G biscuits, which built a massive export footprint across Asia, Africa and the Middle East, Melody's overseas presence remained comparatively limited for decades.

The toffee was exported sporadically through Indian diaspora retail channels in countries such as the UAE, the UK, Canada and parts of Africa, but it never became a globally marketed flagship product. The challenge was practical as much as commercial: Melody's chewy caramel texture made large-scale international distribution more complicated than shelf-stable biscuits.

But the Modi-Meloni moment may have changed the equation. Marketing experts already believe the viral visibility could revive export interest among diaspora retailers and nostalgia-driven international consumers. In an age where global food culture increasingly celebrates authenticity and retro brands, Melody suddenly possesses what every marketer dreams of — a story.

And what a story it is. An old Indian toffee, nearly forgotten by modern retail culture, unexpectedly travels to Rome in the hands of India's Prime Minister and ends up delighting Italy's Prime Minis-

ter. You cannot script branding better than that.

And when Melody the caramel fluffed with chocolate inside became a story bigger than the toffee itself. There is something wonder-

DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

People of Falta have spoken! Democracy has won and intimidation has lost.

Congratulations to Shri Debangshu Panda Ji for winning in Falta by a record margin. It indicates the unwavering faith of the people of West Bengal towards the BJP. People are seeing the exceptional work of the West Bengal Government across sectors and thus have decided to further bless us.

My compliments to all BJP Karyakartas across West Bengal for their outstanding work. We will keep working for West Bengal's progress in the times to come. ~ Narendra Modi, PM



fully Indian about the entire episode.

India often exports software, pharmaceuticals, engineers and geopolitics. But occasionally, it exports emotion. Melody belongs to that category — a small edible memory carrying the taste of childhood. Perhaps that explains why the moment resonated so deeply online.

For older Indians, it revived memories. For younger Indians, it introduced a retro cultural icon. For the rest of the world, it revealed a softer, playful side of diplomacy rarely seen in official state visits.

In an age dominated by geopolitical tensions, tariffs and wars, a caramel toffee briefly reminded the world that diplomacy can also smile.

And somewhere in Mumbai, the makers of Melody must be wondering whether the sweetest marketing campaign in modern Indian history arrived not from Madison Avenue, but from Rome — courtesy of two prime ministers and one gloriously nostalgic candy.

Assam Sees Over 55% Drop in Cyber Crime Cases in 2024: MHA Data

GUWAHATI

Assam recorded a sharp decline in cyber crime cases in 2024, registering a fall of more than 55 per cent compared to the previous year, according to the latest data released by the Ministry of Home Affairs.

The state reported 408 cyber crime cases in 2024, down from 909 incidents in 2023, even as cyber crimes across India rose significantly during the same period.

Nationally, a total of 1,01,928 cyber crime cases were registered in 2024, marking an increase of around 18 per cent over the 86,420 cases recorded in 2023.

Police sources attributed Assam's decline in cyber crime to intensified crack-



downs on cyber offenders and increased public awareness campaigns carried

out by law enforcement agencies. The improvement is particularly significant considering that Assam had recorded the fifth-highest number of cyber crime cases among all states and Union Territories in 2021, when 4,846 incidents were reported. The number declined to 1,733 in 2022, placing the state ninth nationally, before dropping further in subsequent years. In 2024, Telangana reported the highest number of cyber crime cases in the country with 27,230 incidents, followed by Karnataka with 21,993, Uttar Pradesh with 11,073, Maharashtra with 9,922 and Bihar with 6,380 cases. During the year under review, 360 individuals were arrested in Assam for alleged involvement in cyber crimes, while 285 persons were charge-sheeted.

Of the total cases registered in the state, 115 were related to computer-based offences, one case involved cyber terrorism, and 253 cases pertained to the publication or transmission of obscene or sexually explicit content in electronic form. Another 37 cases were registered under various provisions of the Information Technology Act, while one case involved fraud.

According to the data, personal revenge emerged as the most common motive behind cyber crimes in Assam, accounting for 121 cases. Fraud-related motives were identified in 55 cases, extortion in 43 cases, and sexual exploitation in 42 incidents. Other motives included anger or emotional triggers, political intentions, reputational damage, business

promotion and piracy.

Women were victims in 196 of the total cyber crime cases registered in Assam during 2024, while children were affected in 20 incidents.

Among other Northeastern states, all except Tripura recorded an increase in cyber crime cases during the year.

Assam reported five cases in 2024 compared to three in 2023. Tripura was the only Northeastern state besides Assam to record a decline, with cyber crime cases dropping to 33 in 2024 from 36 the previous year.

Five killed in lightning strikes across Assam amid severe weather conditions

GUWAHATI

At least five people have died in lightning strike incidents across different districts of Assam over the past three days as severe weather conditions continue to affect the state.

According to the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA), three people were killed by lightning on May 23 in Kokrajhar, Barpeta and Golaghat districts.

One death each was also reported from Udalguri district on May 22 and Dibrugarh district on May 21.

The ASDMA said six animals were also killed in lightning-related incidents during the same period. Apart from the fatalities, several districts experienced storms and strong winds on Saturday, causing damage to houses and infrastructure.

The affected districts include Goalpara, Bongaigaon, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur, Hojai, Dibrugarh and Golaghat.

According to official reports, nearly 31 villages under 11 revenue circles suffered varying degrees of damage due to storm activity.

Local administrations and disaster management teams have been assessing the extent of the destruction and monitoring the situation.

Meanwhile, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) has issued fresh alerts for thunderstorms, lightning and heavy rainfall in several parts of Assam over the coming days.

Authorities have urged residents to remain cautious, avoid open fields during thunderstorms and strictly follow official weather advisories.

The recurring incidents of lightning-related deaths have once again highlighted the vulnerability of several districts in Assam during the monsoon and pre-monsoon seasons, particularly in rural and open areas where people remain exposed to extreme weather conditions.

Northeast fisheries review meet in Mizoram to focus on growth, market linkages

NEW DELHI

Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying will hold the "Regional Review Meeting: Northeastern Region 2026" in Aizawl on May 25 to review the progress of fisheries, livestock and dairy sector initiatives across the Northeast.

Union Minister Rajiv Ranjan Singh is scheduled to inaugurate and lay foundation stones for fisheries projects worth nearly Rs 32.15 crore during the event.

According to the ministry, the projects aim to strengthen fisheries infrastructure in the Northeast, promote modern aquaculture practices and support sustainable livelihood generation in the region.

The meeting will be chaired by the Union Minister in the presence of Ministers of State S. P. Singh Baghel and George Kurian.

Ministers handling fisheries and animal husbandry portfolios from Arunachal Pradesh, Assam,

Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura are expected to participate in the hybrid-format event.

Senior officials from the Centre and Northeastern states, including secretaries from the Department of Fisheries and the Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying, will assess the implementation status of various schemes in the region.

The discussions are expected to focus on future strategies for sustainable growth, farmer welfare and livelihood enhancement in the fisheries and dairy sectors.

During the programme, the ministry will launch a baseline village-level survey aimed at expanding the coverage of Multipurpose Dairy Cooperative Societies (MDCS).

An awareness film on African Swine Fever (ASF) and a booklet titled "Good Husbandry Practices in Pig Farming" will also be released.

IMPHAL

Hundreds of youths and women participated in a bike rally across several parts of Manipur on Sunday to protest against what organisers described as growing "narco-terrorism" threats in the state.

The rally, organised by the Indigenous People's Front under the theme "Save Manipur from Narco Terrorism", began from the Koujung Leima temple campus in Sekmai and concluded at Khuman Lampak in Imphal.

The demonstration was flagged off by Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity convener Yengkokpam Dhiren along with senior members of the organisation.

Speaking during the rally, Dhiren said the programme was aimed at safeguarding indigenous communities from the alleged activities of narco-terrorist groups operating in the state.

The rally passed through

Hundreds join bike rally in Manipur against alleged 'narco-terrorism'



several localities, including Luwangsangbam, Chingmeirong, Thangmeiband, Khoyathong, Nagamapal, Keishampat, Bishnupur, Moirang, Kakching, Thoubal, Singjamei and Wangkhei.

The mobilisation comes amid heightened tensions following a recent public gathering near Makhnan Naga Village Gate in Kanglembi in Imphal West dis-

trict. The event was jointly organised by multiple civil society organisations protesting alleged Kuki aggression and the reported abduction of civilians earlier this month.

According to community leaders, 20 civilians were allegedly abducted in separate incidents between May 13 and May 15 from

Leilon Veiphei and Sapormeina areas. While 14 people have reportedly been released, six were still said to be in captivity. Civil society groups accused the authorities of failing to prevent the incidents and issued a three-day ultimatum demanding the safe rescue of the remaining hostages. The organisations also demanded legal action against those allegedly involved in the abductions, cancellation of the Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement with the Kuki National Front (Presidential) and intensified security operations in affected areas. They further called for the removal of BJP MLA Nemcha Kipgen from her government position, alleging links to a militant through family ties.

In a joint statement, the organisations said indigenous communities in Manipur would remain united against what they described as repeated attacks and territorial aggression.

AASU announces Rs 50,000 assistance for UPSC aspirants clearing prelims

GUWAHATI

All Assam Students' Union (AASU) has announced a special financial assistance scheme for UPSC aspirants from Assam under which 25 candidates who clear the Civil Services Preliminary Examination will receive a one-time aid of Rs 50,000 each.

The announcement was made by AASU president Utpal Sarma through a video message on Sunday as the UPSC Civil Services Preliminary Examination commenced across the country, including in Assam.

Extending his best wishes to candidates appearing for the examination, Sarma said the initiative was aimed at encouraging more students from Assam to succeed in the prestigious civil services examination and secure positions in the country's



administrative system.

He said the financial assistance would support successful candidates in preparing for the mains exami-

nation and personality test by helping them enrol in reputed coaching institutes, purchase test series and attend mock interview sessions.

"Many students require advanced guidance and training after clearing the prelims. Through this initiative, AASU wants to support deserving candidates in their journey towards the civil services," he said.

According to the student organisation, the scheme has been launched under its special project titled "Pratyahwan", which focuses on nurturing capable bureaucrats from Assam.

Sarma further stated that AASU would continue to play an active role in supporting talented students from the state and helping them compete successfully at the national level.

He also appealed to the people of Assam to extend their cooperation and blessings for the success of the initiative and to ensure greater representation of Assamese youth in the country's civil services.

Meghalaya rolls out education reforms in Tura with digital systems and expanded school monitoring

SHILLONG

Meghalaya launched a series of major education sector reforms in Tura, including new digital governance platforms for the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE), the introduction of the CM LEAD Fellowship programme and enhanced school monitoring measures.

As part of the initiative, 27 official vehicles were flagged off from the Matchakolgre LP School playground and assigned to officials of the School Education and Literacy Department, including District and Sub-Divisional School Education Officers.

The move is aimed at improving field supervision and monitoring in remote and rural areas by strengthening mobility for education officials.

Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma said Meghalaya's education system remains one of the most complex in the Northeast due to the extensive network of schools and teachers across the state.

He said the government had continued structural reforms despite the challenges posed by the scale of the system.

Sangma also highlighted that the state government had committed an additional Rs 215 crore annually to support SSA teachers, addressing long-standing concerns related to salaries and job security.

According to him, the measure is intended to ensure dignity and financial stability for teachers while enabling them to access institutional credit and improve livelihood security.

The Chief Minister said Meghalaya currently spends around Rs 3,500 crore annually on education and supports nearly 4,500 grant-in-aid institutions statewide.

He stressed that improving educational standards requires interventions at the individual student level rather than focusing solely on overall pass percentages.

Although the state recorded a 97.26 per cent SSLC pass rate this year, Sangma said reforms must go beyond examination results.

"The focus has to shift to micro-level improvements, reaching every student," he said.

The programme also marked the launch of two new MBOSE digital platforms - the E-Office Management System and an Accounting System Software - aimed at improving administrative efficiency, transparency and accountability in education governance.

Officials said the systems are expected to streamline processes and strengthen coordination among students, teachers, parents and education authorities.

The government additionally announced the CM LEAD Fellowship programme, which seeks to improve classroom instruction and education management across nearly 8,000 government and aided schools in Meghalaya.

Education Commissioner and Secretary Vijay Kumar Mantri said the government had been working on a structured pay framework to ensure long-term financial stability and security for teachers across the state.

Alleged custodial torture of Arunachal anti-drug activist sparks outrage across state

ITANAGAR

Allegations of custodial torture against prominent Arunachal Pradesh anti-drug activist Gumin Mize have triggered widespread outrage across the state, with several youth organisations, civil society groups and anti-drug bodies demanding an impartial investigation into the matter.

Mize, president of the Arunachal Anti Drugs Warrior, was reportedly detained following an incident near the Assam-Arunachal border. Members of the organisation alleged that he was physically tortured while in custody in Assam's Lakhimpur district.

Supporters claimed photographs circulating after his detention showed visible bruises and injuries on his body, fuelling anger and concern among people across Arunachal Pradesh.

Several organisations and activists described Mize as a dedicated anti-drug campaigner who has worked extensively to combat substance abuse, identify alleged drug peddlers



and support rehabilitation efforts in different parts of the state.

The incident has since become a major public issue in Arunachal Pradesh, with growing calls for judicial intervention and a transparent probe into the allegations of custodial abuse.

Human rights activists and community leaders have also appealed to state and national human rights bodies to monitor the case closely and ensure due legal process is followed.

Members of the anti-drug organisation alleged that Assam Police

the allegations against the police personnel involved.

According to reports, the complaint linked to the case was allegedly lodged by Popi Kakoti, wife of Rupam Kakoti, a resident of Chessa under Bihpuria Police Station in Assam's Lakhimpur district.

Sources claimed that Rupam Kakoti had earlier been arrested by Arunachal Pradesh Police from the Banderdewa check gate in connection with alleged drug peddling activities.

Supporters of Mize argued that his campaign against drug abuse and alleged narcotics networks in the Assam-Arunachal border belt had earned him widespread public support and recognition across Arunachal Pradesh.

As of Sunday evening, Assam Police had not issued any official statement regarding the custodial torture allegations. The controversy, however, continues to intensify, with increasing demands for accountability from both Assam and Arunachal Pradesh authorities.

Observers have also cautioned that failure to address the issue transparently and sensitively could affect public sentiment and relations between communities living along the Assam-Arunachal border areas.

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India, US push for trade deal, energy cooperation as Jaishankar flags visa concerns



NEW DELHI

India and the United States on Sunday sought to project continuity and momentum in their strategic partnership despite unease over trade talks and tightening American visa policies, with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar raising concerns over difficulties faced by legitimate Indian travellers seeking entry into the US. Addressing a joint press conference in Delhi alongside US Secretary of State Marco Rubio after delegation-level talks, Jaishankar said the two sides had made progress in trade negotiations and remained committed to deepening cooperation in energy, technology, mobility and regional security. "We spoke about the value of concluding at an early date the final text of the interim agreement regarding reciprocal and mutually beneficial trade," Jaishankar said, referring to efforts to operationalise the broader bilateral trade framework envisioned during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Washington earlier this year.

An Indian delegation had recently travelled to the US for discussions, he said, while an American team was expected

in India soon to carry negotiations forward.

Rubio confirmed that both sides were "on the verge" of reaching a durable agreement. "The US-India relationship has not lost any momentum," Rubio said, pushing back against suggestions that trade tensions under President Donald Trump had strained ties. "We are hopeful that our trade representative can visit here very soon... We've made tremendous progress and I think we're going to wind up with a trade agreement between the United States and India that's going to be enduring, beneficial to both sides and sustainable," he added.

Rubio also defended Trump's aggressive global trade recalibration and said it was not directed specifically at India. "This is not about India. This is about the United States in terms of trade," he said.

"There is virtually no country in the world that I could travel to that isn't going to raise the issue of trade because we did this from a global perspective," the top US diplomat added. Energy security emerged as another major focus of the talks, particularly amid instability in West Asia and concerns over global oil

prices. Jaishankar underscored that India's priority remained ensuring affordable and accessible energy supplies for its population.

"Our government's fundamental responsibility is to address the needs of 1.4 billion people," he said. "Ensuring the accessibility and affordability of energy for them is our prime objective."

The minister outlined India's balancing strategy in the Middle East, noting that New Delhi maintained strong ties simultaneously with the United States, Israel, Iran and Gulf nations.

"We don't look at it as a zero-sum game," Jaishankar said. "We have to manage and take care of all these accounts."

He added that India's interests in the region centred on peace and stability, the welfare of the Indian diaspora, uninterrupted maritime commerce and lower energy prices. "We want to see energy prices go down because we are a very big importer of energy," he said.

"People-to-people ties are at the heart of the relationship," Jaishankar said. "I apprised Secretary Rubio of challenges that legitimate travellers face in respect of visa issuance."

"While we cooperate to deal with illegal and irregular mobility, our expectation is that legal mobility should not be adversely impacted as a consequence," he said, stressing that easier movement remained crucial for business, technology and research cooperation.

Rubio responded by insisting that recent visa policy changes were not aimed at India specifically, though he acknowledged broader immigration restrictions introduced by Washington.

Fuel prices hiked again; petrol, diesel up Rs 2.61-2.71 per litre, cumulative increase nears Rs 7.5 in two weeks



NEW DELHI

Petrol and diesel prices were increased by Rs 2.61 and Rs 2.71 per litre, respectively, on Monday, marking the fourth hike in under two weeks as state-owned fuel retailers continued to align pump prices with rising global crude oil costs due to West Asia conflict.

With the latest revision, cumulative increases in fuel prices since revisions resumed on May 15 have nearly reached Rs 7.5 per litre, raising concerns over infla-

tion and higher transportation costs across sectors.

Following Monday's hike, petrol in Delhi rose to Rs 102.12 per litre from Rs 99.51, while diesel climbed to Rs 95.20 from Rs 92.49, according to industry sources.

Fuel prices had remained unchanged for an extended period before revisions resumed earlier this month. Petrol and diesel prices were first raised by Rs 3 per litre each on May 15, followed by a 90 paise increase on May 19. Another revision on May 23 saw

petrol prices go up by 87 paise per litre and diesel by 91 paise.

In Mumbai, petrol now costs Rs 111.21 per litre and diesel Rs 97.83. Kolkata recorded prices of Rs 113.51 for petrol and Rs 99.82 for diesel. In Chennai, petrol is priced at Rs 107.77 and diesel at Rs 99.55. Fuel rates vary across states due to differences in local taxes.

The latest hikes come amid elevated global crude oil prices, tighter refining margins and a weaker rupee, all of which have increased import costs.

State-run fuel retailers, Indian Oil Corporation, Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited, account for nearly 90 per cent of India's fuel retail market.

Global crude prices have surged more than 50 per cent since late February following US-Israeli strikes on Iran and disruptions to shipments through the Strait of Hormuz, a key global oil transit route.

Fuel retailers had absorbed rising input costs for nearly two-and-a-half months, with the government saying the move was aimed at shielding consumers from inflation.

Opposition parties, however, alleged that price revisions were delayed until after key state elections.

The May 15 revision followed the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) gains in three of five state and Union Territory elections, including West Bengal.

Private retailers have also mirrored the hikes. Nayara Energy matched PSU price revisions and had earlier increased petrol and diesel prices by Rs 5 and Rs 3 per litre, respectively, in March. Shell plc raised petrol prices by Rs 7.41 per litre and diesel by as much as Rs 25 per litre from April 1.

Meanwhile, Jio-BP, the fuel retail venture between Reliance Industries Limited and BP plc, aligned its pump prices with PSU retailers.

Petrol and diesel prices are now at their highest levels since May 2022. Rates had remained frozen since April 2022, barring a Rs 2 per litre cut in March 2024 ahead of national elections.

INTERNATIONAL

'World will get some good news': Rubio hints at imminent US-Iran deal to end war

WASHINGTON

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio on Sunday said that an announcement was possible later in the day over a peace deal with Iran that could formally end the war in West Asia.

Rubio, who is on his first visit to India, said the emerging deal would address US concerns on the Strait of Hormuz, which Iran has largely blocked in response to the US-Israeli attack.

"I do think perhaps there is the possibility that in the next few hours the world will get some good news," Rubio told reporters in New Delhi.

The agreement would also start a "process that can ultimately leave us where the president wants us to be, and that is a world that no longer has to fear or worry about an Iranian nuclear weapon", he added.

His remarks came after US President Donald Trump said a proposal that included opening the Strait of Hormuz had been "largely negotiated".

Trump's post stressed that Hormuz would be re-opened, a development that would bring relief to energy markets after a long Iranian blockade of a crucial waterway that in peacetime carries a fifth of world oil exports.

"An Agreement has been largely negotiated, subject to finalization between the United States of America, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the various other Countries," Trump wrote on his Truth Social platform.

Notably, Iranian officials confirmed the existence of a draft agreement, but stressed that -- contrary to earlier long-standing US demands -- talks on the issue of Iran's contested nuclear programme have been deferred for 60 days after any deal.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio speaks during a bilateral meeting with Union External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, unseen, at Hyderabad



House, in New Delhi, Sunday, May 24, 2026.

Notably, on Saturday, Rubio had reiterated Washington's hardline position that Tehran must not be allowed to develop nuclear weapons.

"There's been some progress made. Even as I speak to you, there's some work being done. This issue needs to be solved, as the President said, one way or the other. Iran can never have nuclear weapons," he said.

The top American diplomat added that Washington's conditions extended to specific nuclear constraints and regional security concerns.

"The straits need to be opened without tolls. They need to turn over their highly enriched uranium... we need to

address the issue of enrichment," Rubio said, outlining the administration's firm negotiating posture.

According to Iran's Fars news agency, Washington has agreed to release part of Tehran's funds frozen abroad under international economic sanctions and to end its naval blockade of ships travelling to and from Iranian ports.

In exchange, "according to this draft, passage through the Strait of Hormuz would return to pre-war levels under Iranian management".

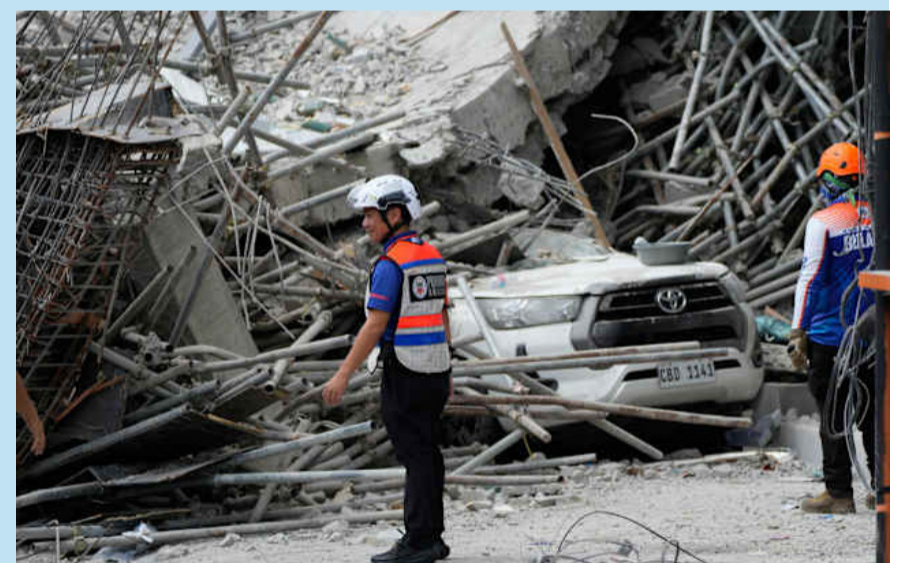
And, Fars said, "sanctions on oil, gas, petrochemicals and their derivatives would be temporarily lifted during the negotiation period so that Iran can freely sell its products".

Leaders from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan and Bahrain, as well as representatives from Turkey and Pakistan, joined a call with Trump to discuss the deal on Saturday.

Pakistan, which mediated historic face-to-face negotiations between US and Iranian delegations in April, hopes to host another round of talks "very soon", Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said.

He said Pakistan's powerful army chief Asim Munir, who visited Tehran on Friday and Saturday, also joined the call, which "provided a useful opportunity... to move the ongoing peace efforts forward to bring lasting peace in the region".

Three dead, 17 workers still missing in collapse of unfinished hotel in Philippines



ANGELES

Rescuers pulled out two workers early Monday from an immense pile of rubble that was a nine-story hotel which collapsed while under construction in a northern Philippine city, bringing the death toll to three with 17 others still missing, officials said.

One of the workers emerged dead while emergency personnel struggled in the early morning hours to revive the other one in an ambulance near the pile of concrete slabs, twisted iron bars and aluminum scaffolding that was all that remained of the building in Angeles City of Pampanga Province. They eventually gave up and drove away.

The poignant scene was witnessed by a small group of journalists, including from The Associated Press, who stood by as hundreds of rescuers led by firefighters and police scrambled for hours to extricate the two workers, who were at the time alive but trapped under concrete slabs and iron bars.

Rescuers tried to provide water and medicine intravenously to one of the trapped workers in the rubble in a desperate effort to keep him alive in the scorching summer heat, regional police chief Brig. Gen. Jess Mendez told the AP. "He never made it despite

all the efforts," he said.

The third dead victim was a Malaysian tourist trapped in a budget inn that was partly hit by the avalanche of debris from the collapsed building. Another guest at the inn was injured but managed to dash out, officials said.

A day after the unfinished building collapse with a loud crashing sound after a fierce thunderstorm, Angeles City Mayor Carmelo Lazatin said rescue efforts would still not be shifted to a body retrieval operation.

"My best hope is that we can rescue more people alive," Lazatin told the AP. "We don't want to give the families of the trapped workers any bad news."

Anxiety and fear among relatives of the trapped workers, who are waiting in sheds near the rubble, have deepened.

"I'm losing hope because of what I see -- slow rescue work," said Lea Mendoza Casilao, a 47-year-old sardine factory worker whose boyfriend, a mason, was among those still trapped in the rubble.

She brought a week's supply of rice and sardines for him at the construction site, but she said they would never meet as scheduled over the weekend after the building where he was sleeping crumbled before dawn on Sunday.

Lazatin said rescuers were moving carefully because huge slabs of concrete were being held up precariously by a tangle of aluminum scaffolding and could crash down on rescuers.

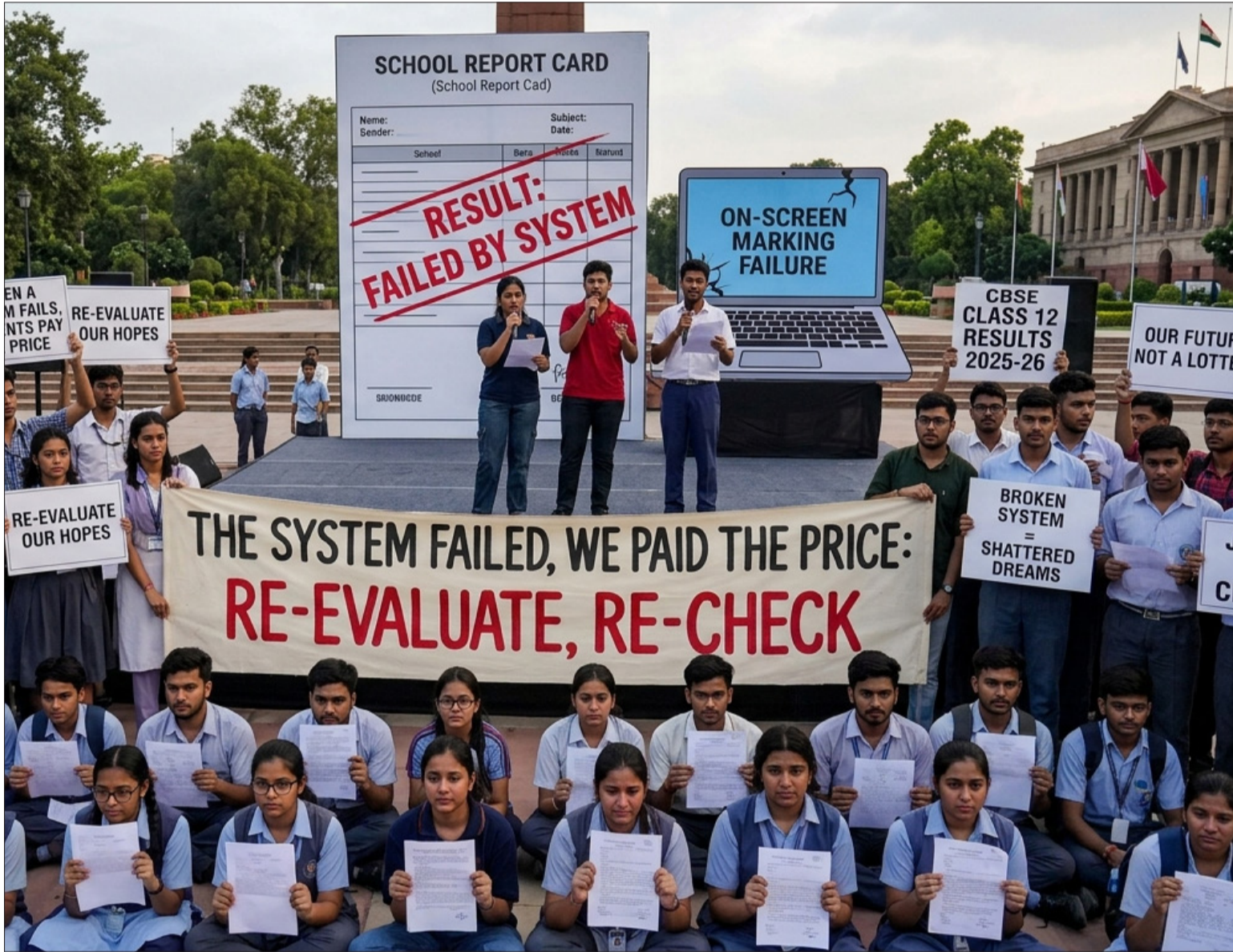
Twenty-six workers were either rescued or managed to run out of the collapsing building, where they slept on pieces of plywood on the ground floor. Of the 17 workers still missing, one has been located but has yet to be extricated from the rubble, officials said.

National police chief Gen. Jose Melencio Nartatez Jr. said his force will support an "ongoing investigation to determine the cause of the incident and possible violations of safety and building regulations."

Angeles City hosted one of the largest US Air Force bases outside of the American mainland, helping turn Angeles and outlying cities and towns into entertainment and commercial hubs in the main northern Philippine region of Luzon.

Clark Air Base, about 80 kilometers (50 miles) north of Manila, closed in the early 1990s. The former American base has become a bustling industrial and tourism enclave called the Clark Freeport Zone, and is still surrounded by remnants of US base-era red-light strips, bars, nightclubs, tattoo shops and budget hotels.

CBSE Class 12 Results 2025-26 When a System Fails, Students Pay the Price



The introduction of On Screen Marking (OSM) amid technical chaos has left lakhs of students questioning their futures and demanding answers.

On May 13, 2026, lakhs of Class 12 students across India eagerly checked their CBSE results, a moment they had worked towards for years. For most of them, what followed was not relief or celebration but shock, confusion and heartbreak. The results were deeply disappointing and the reasons behind this go far beyond the difficulty level of the question papers.

Something went wrong and it went wrong at a systemic level. The Numbers Tell a Worrying Story

Compare this year's result data with last year's, and a clear and troubling picture emerges:

More students appeared this year yet fewer passed. Fewer scored above 90%. Fewer reached above 95%. This is not a natural dip. This demands an explanation.

What is On Screen Marking and What Went Wrong?

This year, CBSE introduced On Screen Marking (OSM) for the first time. A system in which teachers evaluate answer scripts digitally, on a screen, rather than on paper. In theory, OSM is a step forward: it is used successfully in several countries and can improve consistency and speed in evaluation.

But in practice, the implementation was deeply flawed.

Consider the scale: 98 lakh (9.8 million) answer scripts had to be evaluated. Only 70,000 teachers were assigned to check them. That means each teacher was expected to evaluate approximately 140 scripts and the entire checking process was compressed into just 8 days. Do the math: each teacher was checking around 18 scripts per day.

Is that enough time to read, understand and fairly assess a student's answer script? Can justice be done to a child's hard work in that kind of rush? And it was not just about speed. The teachers themselves have reported serious technical problems throughout the evaluation process:

- * Answer scripts were uploaded upside down, making them impossible to read correctly.

- * Servers crashed repeatedly, interrupting the evaluation mid-process.

- * Screens were blurry or unclear, making handwriting difficult to decipher.

- * Weak internet signals caused frequent disconnections.

- * Login and logout issues prevented evaluators from accessing scripts at all.

- * In some cases, the system appeared to auto-check scripts without a human evaluator reviewing them at all.

The mock training provided to teachers before OSM was rolled out was also reported to be inadequate. Teachers were not prepared to handle the technical demands of this new system and when problems arose during actual evaluation, there was little support available.

This is not speculation. These are documented complaints from the very teachers who were responsible for checking the papers.

A System That Was Not Ready CBSE deserves credit for wanting to modernise. OSM, when done right, can make the evaluation process more transparent and efficient. But introducing a system of this magnitude for 98 lakh scripts without properly equipping teachers, without a reliable technical infrastructure and without adequate time for evaluation is a serious failure of planning.

Innovation without preparation is not progress. It is risk and in this case, students paid the price.

Even as CBSE students struggle with these results, we are also witnessing the continuing crisis of NEET examination question paper leaks. Once again, a high-stakes national examination has been com-

promised. Once again, students who worked honestly find themselves penalised. These are not isolated incidents they point to a deeper, systemic problem in how we conduct and manage examinations in this country.

The Human Cost: Students in Crisis

Class 12 is not just an exam. It is the gateway to a student's future to college admissions, to entrance examinations, to the career they have dreamed of. When results do not reflect what a student genuinely deserved, the consequences are

devastating.

Today, thousands of students across India are ineligible for entrance examinations because their scores have fallen below cut-offs not necessarily because they failed to prepare but because the system that evaluated their work was broken.

These are young people who studied through pressure, through anxiety, through months of sacrifice. They had ambitions. They had plans. And overnight, those plans have been shattered not because of their own shortcomings, but because a hastily implemented technology failed them. The mental trauma that students and their families are currently experiencing is real and profound. This cannot be brushed aside as an unfortunate statistic.

What Needs to Happen Now

The situation calls for urgent, concrete action:

1. A thorough and independent investigation must be conducted into the OSM evaluation process and its technical failures.

2. A comprehensive rechecking of answer scripts must be undertaken particularly for students where significant drops in marks are evident.

3. CBSE must be transparent with the public about what went wrong and must take responsibility.

4. The Ministry of Education must treat this as a crisis and intervene immediately.

5. Students who are affected must be given relief including revised eligibility criteria for entrance examinations where necessary.

The government and the education ministry cannot afford to remain silent on this. These are not just numbers on a result sheet. These are the futures of our children.

We owe it to every student who sat in that examination hall with hope in their hearts to investigate what happened, to make it right, and to ensure that no future batch of children is failed by the very system that is supposed to serve them.

(The author is a CBSE Resource Person with extensive experience in school education)

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