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PERSPECTIVE
If you can overthink the worst, why can't you overthink the best?

'CM taking revenge': Congress alleges Vendetta as Pawan Khera appears before Assam police

GUWAHATI
Senior Congress leader Ripun Bora on May 13 accused Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma of pursuing a "personal vendetta" against Congress national spokesperson Pawan Khera after the latter appeared before the Crime Branch at Pan Bazar Police Station in Guwahati for questioning.

Speaking to reporters, Bora said Khera appeared before the investigating officer as a "law-abiding citizen" in compliance with directions linked to the bail granted by the Supreme Court.

"Pawan Khera has come and appeared before the Crime Branch because when bail is granted, there is a provision that the person has to cooperate with the investigation and appear before the concerned police station for interrogation," Bora said. Calling the questioning a "routine process" under legal procedure, Bora maintained that Khera was complying fully with the court's directions and would be released after interrogation. However, the Congress leader alleged that the case had turned into a matter of personal prestige for the Assam Chief Minister.

"It is definitely personal vendetta because the Chief Minister has taken it as his personal issue. CM ordered the arrest of Pawan Khera for a very petty reason," Bora alleged.

He further claimed that while allegations can be made by anyone in a democracy, it is ultimately the court that decides their validity.

"Whether allegations are true or not will be ascertained by the competent court. But the CM took the matter personally and ordered his arrest," Bora said.

WHO SAID WHAT



Assam's identity will be preserved
All manifesto promises will be fulfilled
With BJP Govts in Assam and Bengal, the Eastern region will see a new wave of security and development
~ Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, CM, Assam.

Church Leaders Ambushed in Manipur's Kangpokpi, Three Feared Dead

Kuki Inpi Manipur Alleges Ambush on Church Leaders, Warns of Highway Blockade

IMPHAL

At least three church leaders were feared killed and several others injured after suspected militants ambushed a convoy of the Thadou Baptist Association in Manipur's Kangpokpi district on Wednesday, triggering widespread condemnation from Kuki-Zo organisations and church bodies.

According to preliminary reports, the attack took place between Kotzim and Kotlen villages near Zero Point/Saheibung Peak when church leaders were returning to Kangpokpi from Churachandpur after attending the United Baptist Convention conference at Chieng-kompang in Lamka.

Sources alleged that the attackers were suspected members of the Zeliangrong United Front-Kamson faction and associated armed groups.

Among those reportedly killed was Rev. V. Sithou, former Gen-



eral Secretary of the Manipur Baptist Convention and current president of the Thadou Baptist Association. Sources said two other pastors also died in the ambush, although officials had not yet confirmed the total number of fatalities at the time of reporting. Several others sustained injuries in the attack. The injured were identified as Rev. SM Haopu, Rev. Hekai Simte, Rev. Kaigoulun, Rev. Paotthang, Pastor Paogou, along with two drivers identified as Lelen and Goumang.

Sources said the church leaders were travelling in two vehicles

when armed assailants allegedly intercepted and attacked them.

The incident sparked strong reactions from Kuki-Zo civil society groups and church organisations, many of which described the attack as an "unprovoked aggression" targeting religious leaders.

Earlier, Kuki Inpi Manipur had warned that repeated attacks in Kuki-dominated areas could trigger widespread unrest and possible blockades along national and state highways if authorities failed to take prompt action. The ambush comes amid continuing tensions and security concerns in Manipur following the ethnic violence that erupted across the state in May 2023.

No official statement had been issued by police or security agencies regarding the identities of the attackers or the exact circumstances surrounding the ambush. Authorities are expected to launch a detailed

investigation into the incident.

Kuki Inpi Manipur has alleged that church leaders from the Kuki community were ambushed by suspected members of the Zeliangrong United Front-Kamson faction and valley-based insurgent groups between the Kotzim and Kotlen areas in Manipur. In a statement shared on social media on Tuesday, the organisation described the alleged attack as an "unprovoked aggression" and warned that the incident could trigger a strict blockade of national and state highways passing through Kuki-dominated areas if authorities fail to intervene promptly.

The organisation urged the concerned authorities to take immediate steps to address the situation and prevent any further escalation of tensions in the region.

Kuki Inpi Manipur, however, did not immediately provide details regarding casualties or injuries linked

to the alleged ambush.

The development comes amid continuing ethnic and security tensions across several parts of Manipur following the outbreak of violence in the state in May 2023.

The warning from the organisation has heightened concerns over possible disruptions along key highway routes connecting hill districts with other parts of the state.

The incident also comes at a time when security agencies remain on high alert in vulnerable areas of Manipur amid sporadic reports of armed activity and inter-community tensions.

No official statement had been issued by the police or security agencies regarding the allegations at the time of reporting. Authorities are expected to verify the circumstances surrounding the reported ambush and assess the security situation in the affected areas.

Assam Assembly session from May 21; Himanta Sarma stresses continuity in governance

GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Wednesday announced that the first session of the 16th Assam Legislative Assembly will begin on May 21, with newly elected legislators set to take oath during the upcoming sitting.

Speaking shortly after assuming office for a second consecutive term, Sarma said the government would immediately resume administrative work and focus on implementing its governance agenda without delay.

"From today onwards, the government will officially start its work. During today's Cabinet meeting, we will decide how many days the Assembly session will continue and what business will be taken up," the chief minister said.

According to sources, the Assembly session is likely to continue for three days beginning May 21, during which the newly elected MLAs will formally take oath.

Earlier in the day, Himanta Biswa Sarma, accompanied by four Cabinet colleagues, visited the memorial of Assam's first Chief Minister and Bharat Ratna Gopinath Bordoloi at Silpukhuri in Guwahati to pay floral tributes before formally beginning the government's second-term functioning.

"Our government, before formally beginning work, visited the memorial of Bharat Ratna Gopinath Bordoloi to seek his blessings so that we can continue to work for Assam's security and develop-

ment," Sarma said.

The chief minister reiterated that safeguarding Assam and protecting the interests of Assamese people would remain among the top priorities of the government during its new tenure.

"The protection of Assam, Assamese people and Indians is our responsibility, and the people will witness it through our work," he added.

Highlighting continuity in governance, Sarma said the new administration would carry forward initiatives launched during its previous term rather than starting afresh.

"This is not a completely new government; it is a continuation. The work we started earlier will continue in the same manner. The time for speeches is over with the end of the elections. People now expect work from us," he said.

The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) recently returned to power in Assam for a third consecutive term after securing a decisive mandate in the Assembly elections.

Himanta Biswa Sarma was sworn in as chief minister at a grand ceremony in Guwahati in the presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

Along with Sarma, four MLAs from the BJP and its alliance partners - the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) - also took oath as ministers.

IMD issues fresh heavy rain alert for Assam, Meghalaya till May 18

GUWAHATI

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has issued a fresh weather alert warning of widespread rainfall and thunderstorms across Assam and several northeastern states over the coming days, with heavy to very heavy rain likely in parts of the region till May 18. According to the IMD, scattered to fairly widespread light to moderate rainfall accompanied by thunderstorms, lightning, and gusty winds reaching speeds of 40-50 kmph is expected over Assam, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh between May 12 and May 16.

The weather office has further predicted isolated heavy rainfall over Arunachal Pradesh from May 13 to May 18 and over Assam during May 12 to May 18. Similar heavy rainfall activity is also likely across Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, and Tripura between May 14 and May 17. The IMD has additionally warned of very heavy rainfall over Assam and Meghalaya from May 13 to May 17, while Arunachal Pradesh may witness very heavy showers on May 17 and 18. Heavy rainfall measuring between 7cm and 11cm has already been recorded at isolated locations across Sub-Himalayan West Bengal, Assam, and Meghalaya during the past 24 hours, indicating an intensification of pre-monsoon activity in the region.

Meteorological data also shows that Assam has so far received 11 per cent excess rainfall during the ongoing pre-monsoon season, which began on March 1. Meanwhile, the IMD stated that conditions are gradually becoming favourable for the onset of the southwest monsoon over parts of the South Bay of Bengal, the Andaman Sea, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands towards the end of this week. The latest alert comes amid forecasts of improved monsoon rainfall over parts of the Northeast this year after the region experienced five consecutive years of below-normal monsoon precipitation

Guwahati Planetarium to Host Week-Long Astronomy Festival with ISRO, TIFR Participation



GUWAHATI

The Guwahati Planetarium is set to host a six-day Astronomy Festival from May 14 to 19, bringing together leading astronomers, scientists and space researchers from some of India's premier scientific institutions for a series of public outreach and educational programmes.

The festival is being organised in collaboration with the Astronomical Society of India under Assam's Science and Technology Department. Experts from institutions such as the Indian Space Research Organisation, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research and Indian Institute of Astrophysics are expected to participate in the event.

According to officials, the festival aims to popularise astronomy and space science among students, teachers and the general public through interactive learn-

ing and direct engagement with scientists.

Director of the Guwahati Planetarium, Rituparna Thakuria, said the initiative has been designed to foster scientific curiosity and encourage young learners to explore the field of astronomy.

She said the event would provide students and teachers from across the Northeast an opportunity to interact with eminent scientists and gain practical exposure through workshops and sky observation sessions.

The six-day programme will feature hands-on training workshops for teachers and students, popular science lectures, interactive discussions and telescopic sky observation sessions. Organisers said the activities are intended to make astronomy more accessible and engaging for participants of all age groups.

Visitors attending the festival will also receive free access to planetarium shows and the Astronomy Gallery throughout the event.

Officials said the Astronomy Festival seeks to inspire greater interest in scientific learning and emerging developments in space science, particularly among children and young students in the region.

The collaborating body, the Astronomical Society of India, is among the country's leading professional organisations representing astronomers and astrophysicists.

Himanta Sarma's lean convoy model aligns with PM Modi's austerity push

GUWAHATI

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi calls for austerity measures and reduced VIP convoys amid economic uncertainty linked to the Iran war and rising global oil prices, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma is already operating with one of the leanest high-security convoys among Indian Chief Ministers.

Despite being under Z Plus security cover, Himanta Biswa Sarma's convoy within Guwahati reportedly consists of only six vehicles, according to official sources. Unlike many high-profile political movements seen across the country, the Assam Chief Minister's convoy does not include separate ambulance or jammer vehicles during routine travel in the city.

Officials said this minimal convoy structure is not a recent adjustment following the Centre's call for fuel conservation and expenditure control. Sources familiar with the Chief Minister's security arrangements stated that Sarma has consciously maintained a compact and operationally efficient convoy system over the last five years, including after assuming office for a second consecutive term.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently urged governments and public representatives to adopt



fuel-saving measures, reduce non-essential expenditure, encourage the use of electric vehicles, and limit convoy sizes in view of the economic pressure arising from global geopolitical tensions and volatile oil prices.

Against this backdrop, Assam's convoy model is being viewed as an example of administrative minimalism without compromising security requirements.

However, officials noted that the convoy size tends to increase during the Chief Minister's visits outside Guwahati, mainly due to the addition of district administration teams, police officials, and departmental officers accompanying review meetings and field inspections. To address this, the Assam

government is now considering the introduction of a "caravan-style" official vehicle for district tours. According to sources, the proposed system would allow senior bureaucrats, district officials, and key administrative personnel to travel together with the Chief Minister in a larger integrated vehicle during inter-district visits. Officials said the idea is aimed at reducing the number of accompanying vehicles while simultaneously improving administrative coordination. Travel time could also be utilised for governance-related discussions, project reviews, and planning meetings on the move, helping save both time and public resources. The proposal is seen as being in line with the Centre's broader austerity narrative and could emerge as a model for reducing VIP movement expenditure without affecting governance efficiency or security management. The move also reflects a wider trend among BJP-led governments to project administrative restraint, fuel conservation, and cost-cutting measures following the Prime Minister's appeal for economic prudence amid global instability.

Assam's Mrigashree Baruah emerges first runner-up at Miss Grand India 2026

Assam's Mrigashree Baruah delivered a stand-out performance at the Miss Grand India 2026 finale, finishing as the first runner-up as contestants from

Northeast India made a strong impact at the national beauty pageant held in New Delhi. The fourth edition of the competition concluded at Talkatora Stadium on May 12, with Tamil Nadu's Lakshita Thilagaraj being crowned Miss Grand India 2026. The 22-year-old computer science engineer from Chennai will now represent India at the Miss Grand International 2026 pageant scheduled for October. Baruah's impressive finish highlighted the growing visibility of northeastern contestants on the national stage. Meghalaya's Tanvi Marak secured the second runner-up position, while contestants from Sikkim and other northeastern states also featured prominently among the finalists.

Saanjh Khurana of Uttar Pradesh, Reshmi Deokota of West Bengal, and Sneha Tamang of Sikkim completed the top six rankings, underlining the strong representation from the Northeast at this year's event. The pageant, held from April 29 to May 12, featured nearly 29 contestants representing states and union territories across India. Participants competed in multiple rounds, including talent, swimsuit, national costume, and a Bollywood-themed gala segment.

This year's edition also marked the debut participation of several states on the Miss Grand India platform, including Manipur, Andhra Pradesh, Hary-

ana, Uttarakhand, and Tamil Nadu. During the final question-and-answer segment, several northeastern contestants drew attention for their outspoken responses on issues ranging from inclusivity and discrimination to women's safety and sexual violence.

Speaking on inclusivity and constitutional values, Assam's Mrigashree Baruah called for greater openness and acceptance in society. She said people should be "open to knowledge, open to people, open to newness of life," while invoking Article 21 of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to life with dignity. Sneha Tamang of Sikkim directly addressed the issue of racial discrimination faced by people from the Northeast. Stressing the need for equality and recognition, she said northeastern people continue to face questions about their identity despite being an integral part of India.

Meanwhile, Meghalaya's Tanvi Marak spoke strongly on crimes against women, advocating stricter punishment in rape cases and asserting that justice and humanity must remain the top priority for policymakers. Winner Lakshita Thilagaraj focused her final response on promoting peace and empathy through education. Emphasising India's diversity as a strength, she argued that compassion and understanding should be taught to children from an early age.

BIOMEDICAL WASTE VIOLATIONS



A peer-reviewed study published in the Journal of Applied Bioanalysis has laid bare what many healthcare administrators may have preferred to keep quiet: government-run health centres across Kashmir are engaged in systematic, widespread violations of India's Biomedical Waste Management Rules, 2016. This is not a matter of paperwork irregularities or procedural lapses. These are dangerous, life-threatening breaches of law that place ordinary citizens, healthcare workers, sanitation staff, ragpickers, and stray animals directly affected. The findings demand not merely attention but urgent, decisive action from the highest authorities.

The study, which assessed 104 Ayushman Arogya Mandirs including 28 Primary Health Centres and 76 Sub Centres across 10 districts of Kashmir found that not a single facility possessed a centralised biomedical waste management room. In facilities that handle syringes contaminated with blood, used dressings soaked in infectious material, discarded needles, and pharmaceutical waste, there is no dedicated space to safely segregate, store, or process what is, by any definition, hazardous material. Researchers rightly called this a "critical infrastructure gap". It is, in truth, a critical failure to comply with established norms.

What makes the situation graver still is the manner in which this waste is being disposed of. Nearly a third of Sub Centres dump biomedical refuse in the open, while over a quarter resort to open burning. The toxic plumes from burning medical waste carry dioxins and heavy metals into the air that local communities breathe. Open dumping contaminated soil and, critically, during Kashmir's heavy rainfall season, seeps into water bodies and underground aquifers that supply drinking water to thousands of households. When medical garbage is mixed indiscriminately with municipal waste, it is not long before stray dogs tear through it and ragpickers – among the most economically vulnerable people in any community – rummage through it with bare hands, wholly unaware that they are handling material that could transmit Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, or HIV.

Perhaps the most alarming dimension of this crisis involves discarded syringes and needles. Sharps pits – designed specifically to prevent the re-entry of used needles into circulation – were available in only 32 per cent of Primary Health Centres and a mere 11 per cent of Subcentres. This is not a trivial statistic. Used syringes, carelessly discarded, can be collected by unscrupulous individuals, repackaged, and sold back into the medical supply chain. An accidental needle-stick injury to a passerby or a child playing near a dumping site can result in a lifelong chronic illness. These are not hypothetical risks; they are documented public health realities.

What compounds the outrage here is the question of accountability. All healthcare facilities operating in India are legally required to maintain records of biomedical waste disposal and submit compliance reports to the relevant authorities. The Biomedical Waste Management Rules, 2016, are explicit and enforceable. Inspection teams – the same teams that regularly audit private clinics and nursing homes, often levying fines for minor infractions – are apparently not subjecting government-run facilities to the same rigour. It is, to put it plainly, a double standard that has allowed systemic non-compliance to flourish unchecked for years.

It is worth emphasising that the infrastructure to do this correctly already exists. Common Biomedical Waste Treatment Facilities operate across the districts of Jammu & Kashmir. Fee structures are in place. Circulars have been issued. Private healthcare providers, under the watchful eye of regulators, largely comply. Only 13 percent of Sub Centres were found to be sending waste to these authorised facilities. The excuse that treatment infrastructure is unavailable simply does not hold.

The path forward must be non-negotiable. Every AAM in Kashmir must be brought into full compliance with the Biomedical Waste Management Rules, 2016 – immediately and without exception. Trained permanent sanitation staff must be deployed, not part-time workers with no understanding of hazardous material protocols.

Colour-coded bins, needle destroyers, and sharps disposal systems must be made universally available. Most critically, every facility must submit a mandatory weekly compliance report on waste disposal to the district health officer, with consequences for non-submission. Discipline is not optional in matters of public health. It is the very foundation of prevention. The institutions that set rules are running these centres and, as such, cannot claim ignorance or other excuses.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

The longer we dwell on our misfortunes, the greater is their power to harm us. - Voltaire

HUMBLLED MAMTA REMEMBERS I.N.D.I.A



ANIL ANAND

The stormy petrel of Indian politics! She truly fits into the bill of this adage. A fighter to the core who refused to accept "injustice" done to her by her parent party, the Congress. She walked-out to set up a political party of her own, squarely based on her street-fighting skills and enormous capacity to lead from the front.

Rising from the scratch after remaining a Union Minister and president of the West Bengal Youth Congress, Mamta Banerjee, a maverick to the core, was and is a rule unto herself who never accepts any hegemony but has strong tendency to dominate.

The white cotton-saree clad simpleton looking diminutive woman briskly walking in her trademark white hawai-chappals led the newly found Trinamool Congress to new heights before the fall with a thud.

Who could have even dreamt of plotting the downfall of the Left-citadel anchored by the indomitable comrade Jyoti Basu who remained chief minister of West Bengal for a record period? There was none to challenge with Congress having fallen on the wayside after further weakening with the quitting of Ms Banerjee and her supporters.

She did literally achieve what was perceived to be an impossible task. The Left's fortress had fallen and Ms Banerjee rose like a colossus. And dominated West Bengal politics for over a decade till the debacle of 2026 assembly election came.

Keeping aside the controversies surrounding the poll-process for the time being, she was beaten at her own game-defeating the Left- by the new emerging power in state, the Bharatiya Janata Party. The latter fully trudged on the communal contours rising on the controversial bogey of Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of voter lists by the Election Commission of India. Ordered in a huff which resulted in deletion of lakhs of voters within no time, put a question mark on the entire process.

The once a stormy petrel of the yore was defanged by none other than a political party, BJP, with which she had once been in alliance and became the railway minister in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee dispensation. There is no doubt that her aligning with the saffron party at that juncture opened a window for the BJP in West Bengal for the first time, despite the founder of the party's former formation Bharatiya Jan Sangh, Dr Shayma Prasad Mukherjee, being a native of the state.

Was it Ms Banerjee's miscalculation to have sided with the BJP squarely out of her hatred for the Congress on the lines of the socialist brigade led by former Defence Minister, George Fernandes?

The cases, though, are not comparable, strong dislike for Congress was a common thread. After all both of them, born mavericks, were cabinet

colleagues in the Vajpayee government. Both of them over-shot their respective ideologies based on secularism to make a common cause with the "Hindutva agenda" to checkmate the Congress and at the same time keep politically afloat.

While Mr Fernandes had somewhere meekly surrendered as during the twilight of his political career the once firebrand leader had lost his sting before the towering Vajpayee-Advani duo.

Ms Banerjee stood her ground and refused to hedge before the same BJP now hemmed by yet another duo from the same formation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah.

So far so good. All this while till she lost election and the chief minister's chair, Ms Banerjee abhorred the rickety I.N.D.I.A bloc of the opposition parties, at times ridiculing it particularly Rahul Gandhi. Not only did she play hide and seek at crucial junctures but at times her tantrums weakened the opposition unity even before it could take a shape.

Was it to still indirectly help her erstwhile ally turned enemy who has ultimately consumed her? Or was it to force her fellow opposition party leaders to accept her supremacy and leadership unconditionally?

She might not have liked to help BJP (read Modi-Shah) but her unpredictability and her mercurial ways of functioning did aid the saffron party by jeopardizing, knowingly or unknowingly, the cause of opposition unity. In the end it added to Mr Modi's strength.

Well, true to her nature she suddenly discovered her long lost love for the I.N.D.I.A bloc minutes after her defeat. A sullen and crestfallen Ms Banerjee in her first press conference after a massive BJP "wave" talked of her next goal to strengthen the alliance. "Not as a leader but as a commoner (read work-

er)", was the catch phrase of her presentation.

Except for Mr Gandhi (read Congress) most of the opposition leaders and their outfits seem to have ignored the "might" of Mr Modi despite the BJP failing to muster a simple majority on its own in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

The three glaring examples are those of Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray, Nationalist Congress Party supreme Sharad Pawar, both the parties are now split and the leaders nursing their wounds, and now Mamta Banerjee lording over the defeat of Trinamool Congress. But for marginal splits in her ranks, here and there, she withstood the Modi-Shah combine's onslaught at engineering a major split as has happened in the other two parties.

Who can forget the unceremonious transition of Nitish Kumar from Bihar's chief minister, vacating the chair for BJP, to Rajya Sabha MP. And Biju Janata Dal chief Naveen Patnaik is licking his wounds after being waylaid by an "old and trusted ally" the BJP.

However, the duo seemed to have other plans down their sleeves which an overconfident and arrogant Ms Banerjee either ignored to see through or inimitably decided to take the things head-on.

Was she ignorant about the ground realities and changing the electoral map and people's mind? Did she fail to counter the polarizing agenda of the BJP and fell in their trap to match it with a similar counter though of a different shade?

These and many more questions will haunt her in the time to come. What baffles one the most is that why did not she plan to unite enter the poll arena to face BJP's growing influence, armed with statecraft.

It is ironic for the opposition unity that most of its leaders remember I.N.D.I.A only ei-

ther after the electoral defeat or during the time of crisis. A sturdy framework for opposition unity has to be cemented during normal times with the leaders keeping their egos and hypothetical ambitions aside.

No one is sure as to how Ms Banerjee's defeat in her native state will strengthen the I.N.D.I.A bloc. She has weakened her case to spearhead the combine enroute to becoming Prime Ministerial candidate. Instead, leaders such as her and DMK chief M K Stalin, both lost their assembly seats, should restart the effort at opposition unity on a very humble note.

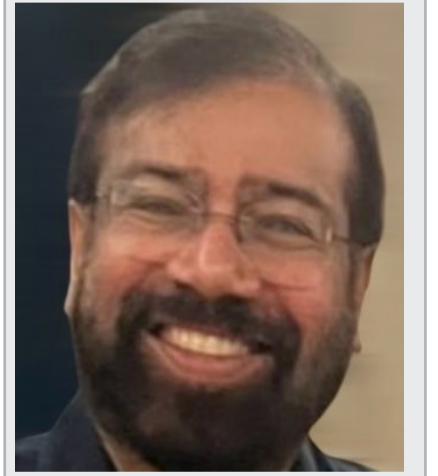
DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

The "Tiger Mom" philosophy that shaped much of East and South Asian success is built on beliefs:

- Excellence is expected
- Education is the surest path to security, status and success
- Discipline, obedience and relentless effort matter more than comfort
- Children are capable of greatness if pushed hard enough

Demanding? Yes. Stressful? Often. But these moms have shaped some of the world's highest-performing societies.

~ Harsh Goenka, Chairman, RPG Enterprises



As Himanta Biswa Sarma takes oath as Assam CM, BJP leaders shower wishes, assure development

GUWAHATI

As Himanta Biswa Sarma took the oath of Chief Minister of Assam for the second time on Tuesday, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders showered the CM with greetings and expressed gratitude to the electors for entrusting the BJP for the third consecutive time.

Union Minister Nitin Gadkari said, "We thank the public for bestowing their trust on the BJP, and we will fulfil their expectations."

Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal extended greetings to Sarma and reiterated the BJP's commitment to work for the development of Assam.

"This is a great day, and we are all proud as the Prime Minister has come along with all other senior ministers from the government of India, and also the Chief Ministers and Deputy Chief Ministers from the different states have arrived. Under the leadership of Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma, we'll be working to make Assam one of the most developed States in the



country," he said. Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta extended warm wishes to the Assam CM. "Due to the blessings of the public, the BJP

government has been formed in the state for a third time. I extend best wishes to Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma and his team," she said.

Newly-elected West Bengal CM Surendu Adhikari said that the Assam government will focus on the state's development under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and CM Sarma. "Under the leadership of PM Modi and Himanta Biswa Sarma, the government will work for the development of the states," he said. Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis expressed happiness over the appointment of Sarma, saying that he has worked for the State's growth.

"It is a matter of happiness the way Himanta Biswa Sarma has worked for the welfare of the public of Assam...The double-engine government of the BJP will take Assam to new heights," he noted.

Haryana CM Nayab Singh Saini said, "I congratulate Himanta Biswa Sarma and under the leadership of PM Modi, the public is bestowing their trust on BJP."

Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, N. Chandrababu Naidu, also showcased support. "We are very happy. This is a great victory, and the public supports those who work for development." Deputy Chief Minister of Rajasthan Diya Kumari extended warm wishes to the Assam government, underlining that progress is evident in the State. "With the hard work of Himanta Biswa Sarma and the vision of PM Modi, we can see the progress and development made in Assam...I wish the Assam government all the best," he said.

Uttar Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Prasad Maurya exuded confidence in the BJP's victory in Uttar Pradesh in the 2027 elections for the third time in a row, similar to Assam.

"The BJP government has been formed in Assam for a third time...I am confident that the BJP will also form the government in UP for a third time in 2027," he said.

BJP MP Bajjant Panda said, "This is a historic day...PM Modi focused on the develop-

ment in Assam."

Meanwhile, Himanta Biswa Sarma took oath as the Chief Minister of Assam for a second term today. The oath-taking ceremony, held at the Veterinary College ground in Khanapara, was graced by the auspicious presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, BJP President Nitin Nabin, senior Union ministers, and chief ministers and deputy chief ministers from several NDA-ruled states.

Along with Sarma, four ministers - two from the BJP and one each from its allies Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and Bodoland People's Front (BPF) - were also sworn in. They include Rameswar Teli, Atul Bora (AGP), Charan Boro (BPF) and Ajanta Neog. Former minister and senior BJP leader Ranjeet Kumar Dass will be the NDA's candidate for the position of Speaker of the state Assembly.

NDA 3.0 Government Will Drive Assam's Growth and Inclusive Development: Sarbananda Sonowal

GUWAHATI

Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal on Tuesday said Assam would continue advancing towards development, peace, prosperity and self-confidence under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. Sonowal made the remarks while attending the swearing-in ceremony of the NDA 3.0 government in Guwahati in the presence of senior leaders of the National Democratic Alliance, including Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

Congratulating Himanta Biswa Sarma on taking oath for a second consecutive term as Chief Minister, Sonowal described the occasion as a historic moment for the people of Assam. "Today is a historic and proud day for the people of Assam. I am deeply moved by the overwhelming affection, blessings and enthusiasm shown by the people during the swearing-in ceremony of the NDA 3.0 government," Sonowal said. He expressed confidence that Assam would enter a new phase of development and inclusive governance guided by the principle of "A for Assam." "Under the visionary and people-centric leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi ji, we firmly believe that Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma will lead Assam towards a new era of development, peace, prosperity and confidence," he added.

The Union Minister further stated that the NDA government would continue taking strong measures against infiltration while protecting the land rights and interests of indigenous communities in the state.

According to Sonowal, the government's new tenure would focus on rapid growth, self-reliance and inclusive progress across sectors including employment generation, women's empowerment, agriculture, education, healthcare, industry and infrastructure.

He also said the administration would continue efforts to preserve Assam's cultural heritage, indigenous languages and the identity of indigenous communities while strengthening the broader vision of "Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat."

Funding Delays Stall Progress of Imphal Ring Road Project in Manipur

IMPHAL

The ambitious Imphal Ring Road project under Manipur's long-term urban development blueprint "Vision 2042" is facing delays amid pending payments of nearly Rs 200 crore to executing agencies, raising concerns over the pace of implementation. According to reports, the Public Works Department Manipur, which is implementing the project, has yet to clear substantial dues owed to agencies engaged in the construction work.

The total estimated cost of the project stands at Rs 1,760 crore. This includes Rs 734.71 crore earmarked for civil works and Rs 447.28 crore allocated for environmental mitigation measures. Additional provisions have been made for green transport systems, social safeguards and technical assistance from the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

The project structure also requires a 10 per cent mobilisation advance to be released to the executing agencies. Officials said that out of the total project cost, approx-

imately Rs 1,383 crore is expected to be repaid over time. Under the funding arrangement, the Manipur government will bear around Rs 138 crore over a 25-year period, while the Government of India will cover the interest component. Backed by financial and technical support from the ADB, the Manipur government has set a target to complete the 51.23-kilometre Imphal Ring Road by December 2026. The project was formally launched in February 2025 and is expected to function as a major bypass corridor to ease persistent traffic congestion in Imphal city. The ring road project forms a key part of the state's broader urban planning strategy and is aimed at improving mobility, reducing travel time and enhancing overall quality of life in the capital region.

Authorities have stated that the project is expected to improve connectivity to markets, healthcare facilities and educational institutions while also generating employment opportunities and boosting economic activity.

GUWAHATI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday congratulated Himanta Biswa Sarma after he took oath as Assam Chief Minister for a second consecutive term, describing him as a "wonderful administrator" who has undertaken "pioneering work" for the state.

Sarma was sworn in during a grand ceremony in Guwahati as the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance returned to power in Assam for a third straight term following a sweeping victory in the Assembly elections.

In a social media post, Modi hailed the NDA's continued success in the state and extended his wishes to Sarma for the new tenure.

"A great day for Assam! For the third consecutive time, the NDA Government assumes office. Congratulations to Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma Ji on taking oath. He has made a mark as a wonderful administrator and has done

PM Modi Praises Himanta Biswa Sarma's Leadership After Assam Swearing-In Ceremony



pioneering work for the state. My best wishes to him for the tenure ahead," the Prime Minister said.

Along with Sarma, four ministers were inducted into the new Council of Ministers. Former Union minister Rameswar Teli, Asom Gana Parishad president Atul Bora, United People's Party Liberal leader Charan Boro, and senior BJP leader Ajanta Neog also took oath as ministers.

deputy chief ministers from 22 NDA-ruled states were also present.

Several prominent religious leaders, including 15 Satradhikars from Assam's Vaishnavite monasteries, attended the event, highlighting its political and cultural significance.

Also present at the ceremony was Sergio Gor, who later highlighted the growing commercial engagement between Assam and the United States.

"Honored to have been invited to Guwahati today to attend the swearing-in ceremony of the Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. The United States and Assam have many commercial ties, and with the CM's leadership we will identify many more win-win scenarios for both of our nations," Gor said in a social media post.

Himanta Biswa Sarma first assumed office as Chief Minister in 2021 and has since led the BJP to further consolidate its political position in Assam.

35 Assam Rifles Awarded Governor's Citation 2026 for Service in Tripura

AGARTALA

The 35 Assam Rifles has been conferred the Governor's Citation 2026 in recognition of its contributions to security operations, anti-narcotics efforts, disaster response, and community welfare activities in Tripura.

The award was presented during an investiture ceremony held at Lok Bhavan in Agartala.

Officials said the battalion has played a significant role in maintaining peace and strengthening security mechanisms in the state since its deployment in Agartala in September 2024.

A major area of focus for the unit has been anti-narcotics operations carried out under the broader "Nasha Mukta North East" initiative. Personnel of the battalion have been actively involved in efforts to curb drug trafficking, prevent illegal cul-



tivation, and support enforcement agencies in cracking down on narcotics-related crimes.

The battalion has also con-

ducted regular area domination patrols, established mobile vehicle checkpoints, and participated in coordinated operations alongside

the civil administration, police, and intelligence agencies to bolster the state's security framework. During severe flood situations in Tripura, Assam Rifles personnel were involved in rescue and relief operations, evacuating stranded residents and distributing essential supplies in affected areas. Officials noted that the battalion's swift response helped restore normalcy in several flood-hit regions.

Apart from security and disaster response duties, the unit has undertaken various civic outreach initiatives, including medical camps, educational activities, awareness drives, and welfare programmes aimed at strengthening ties with local communities.

Authorities said the Governor's Citation recognises the battalion's sustained commitment and multifaceted service to the people of Tripura.

Kunki Chowdhury's mother plans Re 1 defamation suit against Himanta Sarma over poll remarks

GUWAHATI

Sujata Gurung Chowdhury, mother of Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) leader Kunki Chowdhury, has said she will file a defamation suit of Re 1 against Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma over remarks allegedly made against her during the recent Assam Assembly election campaign.

She has also demanded a public apology from the chief minister, alleging that statements made during the campaign defamed her publicly and endangered her family members, including her minor children.

In an open letter posted on X on May 12, Sujata Gurung Chowdhury described herself as a "common woman" whose name was repeatedly mentioned by the BJP leader during the election period. She accused Sarma of making "false allegations" with "malafide intention" in order to politically target her daughter, who contested the Guwahati Central seat as a candidate of the opposition alliance.

"Hon'ble CM Sirjee, it may be noted that your defamation suit will be for an amount of Rs 1.00 (Rupee one only) along with a public apology from you," she wrote in the letter, though she did not specify when the legal proceedings would be initiated.

According to Sujata, the chief minister allegedly referred to her as a "beef eater", "non-sanatani" and "anti-India communist" without any knowledge of her personal beliefs, culture or background.

"Without knowing anything about me or my life, my food habits, my culture, my religion, my ideology or perhaps even me as a person, you called me a 'beef eat-

er', a non-sanatani, an anti-India communist," she stated.

She alleged that the comments were aimed at shaping an election narrative and influencing public opinion against her daughter during the campaign.

Kunki Chowdhury, a first-time electoral contestant from the Assam Jatiya Parishad, lost the Guwahati Central constituency to BJP candidate Vijay Kumar Gupta, who was also making his electoral debut.

In the letter, Sujata said she initially chose not to respond publicly during the election campaign because engaging with political attacks at the time "did not make sense". However, she said that as an elected chief minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma was now "answerable" to citizens and the public.

While congratulating Sarma on returning to office for a second consecutive term, she also stressed that every citizen has a constitutional right to practise their own religion, culture, food habits and ideology without fear or public targeting.

"You may have won the election, but my battle will go on as long as the common man like me keeps breathing," she wrote.

Sujata further alleged that photographs of her minor children were circulated publicly during the controversy, which she claimed compromised their safety and security.

"I have not only been defamed in public, but the photograph of my minor children being released in public domains has endangered their lives," she alleged.

She signed off the letter describing herself as a "Hindu by birth and culture and not by politics".

Assam Police Intensifies Crackdown on IPL Betting Networks, Four Held in Silchar

SILCHAR

Assam Police has intensified its statewide crackdown on illegal IPL betting syndicates, arresting four persons in Silchar during a series of intelligence-based raids targeting online gambling operations allegedly run through mobile applications and digital payment channels.

The operation, carried out by Assam Police in Cachar district, forms part of a broader campaign against illegal betting networks that authorities say have expanded rapidly during the ongoing Indian Premier League season by exploiting smartphone-based platforms and online transactions.

Police officials said the raids were launched after investigators received specific intelligence inputs about organised betting activities allegedly being operated from multiple locations in Silchar through mobile applications linked to gambling transactions. The coordinated operation was supervised by Rajat Kumar Pal, who led simultaneous raids at suspected locations connected to the network. One of the major raids was conducted at premises on Udayan Complex Road in Das Colony, where police allegedly caught three suspected bookies while operating the betting racket. The accused were identified as Suman Roy (42), another Suman Roy (48), and Nitai Roy (40).

Investigators said preliminary findings suggest the accused had allegedly been operating the illegal betting network throughout the IPL season, facilitating wagers through online applications and mobile communication channels. Police estimate that transactions linked to the racket may have exceeded Rs 50 lakh during the tournament period.

Officials stated that the accused were allegedly maintaining detailed records of gambling transactions while managing betting activities through online applications.

During the search operation, police seized five notebooks allegedly containing betting calculations, gambling ledgers and transaction records linked to IPL wagers. Officers also recovered cash amounting to Rs 30,190, seven mobile phones suspected to have been used for coordinating betting activities, and a black-coloured bag believed to be associated with the operation.

Investigators said the betting activities were allegedly being conducted through a mobile application identified as "Om777," which police suspect was facilitating real-time gambling during IPL matches. Cyber investigators are now examining the seized mobile devices and transaction records to identify possible links to larger interstate betting syndicates. Police sources indicated that the investigation may widen further, as authorities suspect the network was not functioning in isolation. In a parallel raid conducted at Ashram Road in Silchar, police arrested another accused, Sanjay Das, from the Sunlight Hospital area under Silchar Police Station jurisdiction. Officers seized two mobile phones and cash amounting to Rs

15,100 from his possession.

All four accused were brought to Silchar Police Station following completion of legal formalities. Officials confirmed that interrogation and technical analysis of the seized digital devices are currently underway.

Investigators are also attempting to trace the flow of money involved in the betting operations, including digital payment channels, bank transactions and online wallet activities allegedly used to circulate gambling proceeds. Police officials said IPL betting syndicates have increasingly shifted towards app-based operations in recent years, making detection significantly more difficult compared to conventional gambling networks. Authorities claim such syndicates frequently rely on encrypted messaging platforms, fake identities and mobile applications to attract users, collect wagers and transfer funds anonymously. The rise of online betting during high-profile sporting tournaments such as the Indian Premier League has emerged as a growing concern for law enforcement agencies across India. Officials believe the widespread use of smartphones, digital payment systems and aggressive online promotion has enabled illegal gambling networks to expand rapidly, particularly among younger users.

Police sources said the latest Silchar raids are part of a larger statewide campaign targeting illegal betting operations allegedly functioning through mobile-based applications during the IPL season.

The operation comes only days after a similar crackdown in Barpeta district. On May 2, police arrested three persons iden-

tified as Jayanta Das, Moyej Uddin Choudhury and Nazrul Islam during a special drive against IPL betting networks. Authorities had then recovered six mobile phones and Rs 7,500 in cash.

The repeated crackdowns indicate that law enforcement agencies are attempting to dismantle a wider network of betting operators allegedly functioning across Assam during the IPL season.

Senior police officials believe illegal betting networks are generating large volumes of unaccounted money while also contributing to cybercrime, financial fraud and social distress among vulnerable users. Authorities have additionally expressed concern over the increasing use of digital applications hosted outside India, which often complicates legal action and financial tracking.

Investigators suspect many such applications operate through proxy servers, temporary user accounts and anonymous payment gateways, making it difficult to identify the masterminds behind the operations. Police said cybercrime units are now examining whether the Silchar betting network had links beyond Assam. Officials have not ruled out possible interstate connections involving larger gambling syndicates operating from metropolitan cities and neighbouring states.

Authorities have repeatedly warned citizens against participating in unauthorised gambling operations, noting that such activities violate existing laws and may expose users to cyber fraud and financial exploitation.

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Connecting the unconnected

PM Modi shrinks convoy, pushes EV use after call to reduce fuel consumption



NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has sharply reduced the size of his official convoy, days after calling for austerity measures and urging citizens to cut down on the use of fuel-driven vehicles.

Official sources said the downsized convoy was deployed during the Prime Minister's recent visits to Gujarat and Assam, shortly after his address in Hyderabad. The reduction was carried out while retaining all key security arrangements mandated under SPG protocol.

Sources added that Modi has also directed officials to incorporate electric vehicles into his convoy wherever feasible, without making fresh purchases.

The SPG has already started implementing the instruction, while ensuring there is no compromise on mandatory security guidelines laid down in the Blue Book.

The Home Minister has also taken steps to reduce his convoy to less than half, fol-

lowing the Prime Minister's appeals for conservative fuel use.

There are also indications from among the ministries and the departments that officials are gearing up for austerity measures in coming days.

The prime minister suggested reducing petrol and diesel consumption, using metro rail services in cities, carpooling, increased use of electric vehicles, utilising railway services for parcel movement, and working from home to conserve foreign exchange.

"We are being directed across the departments to identify all possible steps that can reduce fuel consumption. The message of the PM is for all, including us. We are waiting for communication from the Department of Personnel & Training (DoPT) detailing what we should do. But every department will have to work out their own plans," a senior official said.

The issue of reducing fuel usage by cutting down unnecessary travel was also

discussed at the informal group of ministers' meeting chaired by defence minister Rajnath Singh on Monday. Addressing a gathering in Secunderabad earlier this week, the Prime Minister stressed that patriotism in present times extends beyond guarding the country's borders and also includes responsible conduct in daily life.

"Patriotism is not only about the willingness to sacrifice one's life on the border. In these times, it is about living responsibly and fulfilling our duties to the nation in our daily lives," the Prime Minister had said.

Highlighting the impact of global disruptions and rising fuel costs, Modi appealed to people to reduce petrol and diesel consumption by increasingly using public transport, car-pooling and electric vehicles. He also urged citizens to reduce edible oil consumption to lower import dependence and called upon farmers to cut the use of chemical fertilisers and move towards natural farming practices.

Sanatana dharma must be abolished': Udhayanidhi Stalin reignites row in Tamil Nadu Assembly



TAMILNADU

DMK leader and Leader of the Opposition (LoP) Udhayanidhi Stalin on Tuesday reiterated his stand against Sanatana Dharma in the Tamil Nadu Assembly, asserting that it "must certainly be abolished" as it "divides the people."

Delivering his maiden speech as LoP, Udhayanidhi repeated remarks similar to those he made in September 2023, which had sparked nationwide outrage

and triggered multiple court cases filed by pro-Hindu organisations.

"Sanatana Dharma, which divides the people, must certainly be abolished," he said in the House.

The DMK leader also raised objections over the alleged sidelining of "Tamil Thai Vazhthu," the Tamil invocation song, during the recent swearing-in ceremony of the new government.

Referring to the sequence of events at the ceremony, he said the state anthem had been moved

to the third position instead of receiving its customary priority.

"Such an incident, which happened during your government's swearing-in ceremony, was a mistake and you should not permit it to happen again in this Assembly. We will not permit it," he said.

Udhayanidhi stressed that "Tamil Thai Vazhthu" must always be accorded primacy at all government and public events in Tamil Nadu.

"I request this government to ensure that this is never compro-

mised. We must be very vigilant in protecting our rights and traditions," he added.

He claimed the change in protocol had caused "anger and shock" among the people of the state and recalled how the previous DMK government had resisted attempts by Governor R N Ravi to alter established conventions in 2023.

Outlining the role of the opposition, Udhayanidhi invoked DMK founder C N Annadurai, describing the opposition as the "brakes of a vehicle" or the "reins of a bull" needed to steer the government in the public interest.

Despite political differences, he said the opposition intended to function constructively rather than merely confront the ruling dispensation.

He pointed out that the opposition benches now held numbers nearly equal to the treasury benches and welcomed the increased presence of first-time MLAs and women legislators in the Assembly.

Injecting a lighter moment into the proceedings, Udhayanidhi noted that he, Chief Minister C Joseph Vijay, and Speaker JCD Prabhakar were all alumni of Loyola College, adding jokingly that the DMK remained the "senior batch" politically.

Reaffirming commitment to the Dravidian model of governance, he said the opposition would closely monitor the government to ensure the principle of "everything for everyone" was upheld.

He also urged the Speaker to remain neutral and ensure the opposition's voice continued to reflect the concerns of the people inside the Assembly.

INTERNATIONAL

Hantavirus: Spain reports new case in passenger evacuated from cruise ship



THE HAGUE

A Spanish passenger evacuated from the cruise ship at the center of a hantavirus outbreak has tested positive for the virus, Spain's health ministry announced Tuesday as the World Health Organization said it has now confirmed 11 cases, including three people from the cruise who died.

The passenger with the new confirmed case of hantavirus was in quarantine in a military hospital in Madrid, where 13 other Spanish nationals evacuated Sunday — who all tested negative for the virus — also are staying.

With the evacuation of all passengers and many crew members completed, the MV Hondius is now sailing back to the Netherlands, where it will be cleaned and disinfected.

The director of the World Health Organization, who was in Madrid, said all 11 confirmed cases are among passengers or crew of the MV Hondius cruise ship, including three people who died. Nine of the 11 cases have been confirmed

as the Andes virus.

"These numbers have changed little over the past week thanks to the governments of multiple countries and partners," Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO director general, said.

"At the moment, there is no sign that we are seeing the start of a larger outbreak," he added, "but of course the situation could change, and given the long incubation period of the virus, it's possible we might see more cases in the coming weeks."

Meanwhile, 12 staff members at a Dutch hospital where a hantavirus patient is being treated were told to quarantine after incorrectly handling bodily fluids.

In a Paris hospital, a French woman evacuated from the stricken ship remained in intensive care in stable condition. The French government was holding two new hantavirus emergency meetings Tuesday, the prime minister said.

Health authorities say it's the first hantavirus outbreak on a cruise ship.

While there is no cure or vaccine for hantavirus, the WHO says early detection and treatment improves survival rates.

Hantavirus, COVID, norovirus, legionnaires': why are cruise ships so prone to disease outbreaks?

A total of 87 passengers and 35 crew were escorted from the ship to shore in Tenerife by personnel in full-body protective gear and breathing masks in a carefully choreographed effort that ended Monday night. Remaining crew members then took on supplies and set course for the Dutch port city of Rotterdam, the ship's operator Oceanwide Expeditions said.

Two aircraft arrived in the southern Dutch city of Eindhoven overnight. The first was carrying 19 of the ship's crew and three medics. The Dutch nationals were taken home to quarantine and the others, including 17 crew members from the Philippines, were sent to a quarantine facility set up by Dutch health authorities.

A second plane landed later in

Eindhoven chartered by Australian authorities and carrying six Hondius passengers — four Australians, one person from New Zealand and a British national who lives in Australia, according to the Dutch foreign ministry. It said the passengers will remain in quarantine near the airport and continue their journey toward Australia "as soon as possible." Australian authorities did not immediately respond to a request for more details.

Hantavirus usually spreads from rodent droppings and is not easily transmitted between people. But the Andes virus detected in the cruise ship outbreak may be able to spread between people in rare cases. Symptoms — which can include fever, chills and muscle aches — usually show between one and eight weeks after exposure.

WHO chief Tedros has advised that returning passengers should stay in quarantine, either in their homes or in other facilities, for 42 days. He added that WHO cannot enforce its guidance, and that different countries may handle the monitoring of passengers without symptoms in different ways.

Twelve employees at a Dutch hospital where a passenger from the Hondius is being treated have to quarantine for six weeks after improperly handling bodily fluids, Radboud University Medical Center said in a statement Monday night. The "risk of infection is low" the hospital said, but was requiring the dozen employees to go into preventive quarantine as a "precaution." The hospital in the eastern city of Nijmegen received a passenger last week from one of the evacuation flights that landed in the Netherlands and the person has since tested positive for hantavirus.

Blood and urine from the patient should have been handled "according to a stricter procedure," the hospital said.

Israel demolishes about 50 Palestinian shops ahead of settlement-linked road project in occupied West Bank



WEST BANK

Israeli bulldozers tore down dozens of Palestinian shops on the edge of a town south-east of Jerusalem this week, clearing land ahead of a settlement-linked road project in the occupied West Bank.

Palestinian officials have said the road is part of a broader plan to keep Palestinian vehicles off a new highway being built to serve nearby illegal Israeli settlements. Israel, meanwhile claimed the demolitions were needed to make way for a road serving local Palestinian communities.

That project is part of a strategic section of the West Bank known as E1, which Israel is developing with the intention of preventing the establishment of a Palestinian state. "The shops that were demolished are where Israel is planning to build a new road that will divert all Palestinian traffic to that road so that they can close down the whole area of E1 for Palestinians," said Hagit Ofra, director of the antisettlement group Peace Now. The project would lead to the displacement of thousands of Bedouin Arabs living in the area, Ofra said.

Tuesday's demolitions took place in the town of al-Eizariya, less than a week after some

owners received notices to evacuate shops built without permits. Attorneys appealed, up to Israel's Supreme Court, but the demolitions went ahead.

Israeli authorities alleged the buildings including car washes, scrap metal shops and vegetable stands were built "illegally" and owners had been warned for "several years" enforcement was forthcoming.

COGAT, the Israeli military body overseeing civil affairs in the West Bank, claimed the structures obstructed construction of the planned road to connect Palestinian towns.

The Palestinian Authority says the demolitions are connected to Israel's plans to overhaul transportation and build a tunnel and bypass road to reroute Palestinian traffic off a major Israeli highway linking nearby settlements to Jerusalem and cutting them off from large swaths of the West Bank. They say it will lead to separate road systems for Israelis and Palestinians.

Israel has not linked the demolitions to its plans for E1. Some of the demolished shops partially blocked sidewalks and roads leading into the town. But Palestinians say proper construction permits are nearly impossible to obtain from Israeli authorities, even

as illegal Israeli settlements rapidly expand.

Mohammad Abu Ghalieh, a 48-year-old shop owner, was dumbfounded that he would have to start over after the demolitions.

"Forty-eight years of night and day to build something for his children and himself, and in one day and one night, everything was gone," he said.

Daoud al-Jahalin, the head of nearby village council, said more than 200 families would lose their incomes.

The E1 project is especially contentious because it runs from the outskirts of Jerusalem deep into the occupied West Bank, isolating the cities of Ramallah and Bethlehem and hindering north-south movement for the Palestinians.

Both Israeli leaders and critics of settlements say the E1 plan would complicate efforts to establish of a contiguous Palestinian state in the West Bank. Israel is planning to build some 3,500 apartments next to the existing settlement of Maale Adumim. Israel invaded and occupied the West Bank in the 1967 Mideast war. The international community overwhelmingly considers Israeli settlement construction in the occupied territory to be illegal and an obstacle to peace.

Assam Faces Unprecedented Opposition Vacuum as NDA Sweep Raises Questions Over Absence of Leader of Opposition

The emphatic return of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to power in Assam has not only reshaped the state's political landscape but also triggered an unusual constitutional and democratic debate. As Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma began his second consecutive term following the NDA's overwhelming mandate in the 2026 Assembly elections, a significant question emerged almost immediately after the results: will the new Assam Legislative Assembly function without an officially recognised Leader of Opposition (LoP)?

For the first time in Assam's political history, the possibility of the LoP post remaining vacant appears real. The discussion has moved far beyond procedural technicalities and entered the broader arena of democratic accountability, legislative balance, and the future of opposition politics in the state.

The NDA's massive victory left the Opposition severely diminished in numerical strength. In the 126-member Assam Assembly, the BJP alone secured 82 seats, while the NDA collectively crossed the 100-seat mark with 102 legislators. On the other hand, the Congress, once the dominant political force in Assam, was reduced to just 19 seats - its worst-ever performance in the state's electoral history.

While the scale of the BJP's triumph reinforced the growing dominance of the saffron party in Assam politics, it also created a constitutional dilemma. Under established parliamentary convention, a party must hold at least one-sixth of the total strength of the Assembly to qualify for the post of Leader of Opposition. In Assam's case, that number stands at 21 seats. The Congress, with only 19 MLAs, has fallen short by two seats.

The issue has suddenly become one of the most discussed political developments in the state, overshadowing even parts of the NDA's celebrations.

Ironically, months before the election results, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma had already hinted at such a scenario. During a political interaction on February 26, Sarma had remarked that the Congress might struggle to retain the LoP position if the electoral arithmetic did not favour the party. At the time, the statement was largely interpreted as a political taunt directed at the Congress and the opposition alliance.

However, the election outcome has transformed that remark into a serious institutional question.

Legal experts believe the matter is not merely symbolic. Senior advocate Anisur Rahman explained that parliamentary conventions governing legislative bodies require the principal opposition party to meet the one-sixth benchmark independently in order to claim the position of Leader of Opposition.

According to Rahman, the Congress's inability to cross the required threshold means the post could remain vacant throughout the Assembly's term unless political circumstances change.

He observed that every opposition party would continue to function with its own legislative leader or president, but there may not be a formally recognised LoP in the House. That distinction, he argued, carries both constitutional and political significance.

What makes the development particularly historic is that Assam has always had a recognised Leader of Opposition since the institutional strengthening of the post in the late 1970s. Political observers note that the LoP position became more formally entrenched in Indian parliamentary democracy after 1977, when opposition politics acquired greater structural recognition within legislative functioning.

The current situation therefore marks a potentially unprecedented moment for Assam's Assembly politics.

Political scientist Dhruva Pratim Sharma described the LoP as an institution central to democratic functioning rather than merely a ceremonial designation. According to him, the position serves as the principal coordinating mechanism through which diverse opposition voices are consolidated inside the Assembly.

He argued that while opposition parties may differ ideologically and politically among themselves, the LoP acts as the collective face of dissent within the legislature, much like the Chief Minister represents the executive side of governance.

Sharma further clarified that alliances or informal understandings among opposition parties do not automatically qualify a party for the LoP position. The numerical requirement applies to an individual party rather than a coalition of opposition groups.

This means that even though the Congress may have support or understanding from smaller parties within the Opposition spectrum, such cooperation cannot compensate for its independent shortfall in numbers.

The debate has consequently reopened larger conversations about the shrinking space for opposition politics in Assam over the last decade.

Since the BJP first came to power in Assam in 2016, the state's political balance has undergone a dramatic transformation. The Congress, which once ruled Assam uninterrupted for fifteen years under former Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, has steadily lost ground election after election.

The 2026 verdict appears to have accelerated that decline even further.

Political analyst Vikas Tripathi noted that



while legislative dominance by the ruling party has been a defining feature of Assam politics since 2016, the latest election has pushed the imbalance to an entirely new level.

According to Tripathi, legislative procedures and parliamentary functioning are fundamentally dependent on numbers. The BJP-led NDA now enjoys an overwhelming majority capable of passing legislation with little resistance inside the House.

He pointed out that although opposition politics may continue outside the Assembly through protests, campaigns and organisational mobilisation, the effectiveness of parliamentary intervention becomes significantly weaker when opposition numbers are drastically reduced.

Tripathi stressed that the absence of a recognised LoP should not automatically be interpreted as the disappearance of opposition politics altogether. Rather, he suggested, it signals the need for opposition parties - especially the Congress - to reorganise themselves politically and structurally if they wish to remain relevant in Assam's evolving electoral landscape.

The challenge before the Congress is therefore not just parliamentary but existential.

The party now faces the difficult task of rebuilding organisational networks, reconnecting with voters, and redefining its political messaging in a state where the BJP has successfully expanded its influence across multiple social, ethnic and regional constituencies.

Observers believe the Congress's decline stems from several overlapping factors: leadership instability, organisational fragmentation, the BJP's aggressive grassroots expansion, and the inability of opposition parties to present a united and credible alternative.

The NDA, by contrast, has managed to project political stability, developmental messaging, and strong leadership under Himanta Biswa Sarma.

The Chief Minister's political style - marked by administrative visibility, rapid decision-making, and constant public engagement - has played a major role in consolidating the BJP's dominance in Assam. Under his leadership, the BJP successfully positioned itself as the central political force capable of combining governance, regional aspirations, and national political alignment.

The 2026 election results reflected that consolidation dramatically.

Yet the conversation surrounding the absence of an LoP has also exposed anxieties about democratic balance within the Assembly.

Legal experts warn that the issue extends beyond questions of prestige or procedural hierarchy. The LoP traditionally plays a key institutional role in coordinating legislative scrutiny, ensuring accountability, and articulating public grievances against the government.

Without an officially recognised LoP, critics fear that opposition interventions inside the Assembly could become fragmented and less effective.

Anisur Rahman argued that one of the major responsibilities of the LoP is to distribute key issues among opposition legislators during Assembly sessions. This coordinated approach ensures that different public concerns are systematically raised and debated.

In the absence of such coordination, there are fears that many critical issues affecting citizens may not receive adequate legislative attention.

Rahman expressed concern that weakening institutional opposition mechanisms could ultimately affect democratic functioning itself. He warned that when opposition representation becomes too marginalised, legislative debate risks becoming one-sided, thereby reducing the scope for scrutiny and accountability.

The concern resonates with broader national debates over the health of parliamentary democracy in India, where several state assemblies and

even the Lok Sabha have witnessed periods of weakened opposition presence.

Supporters of the BJP, however, argue that the electoral verdict must be respected as a reflection of public will. According to them, the NDA's massive mandate demonstrates voter confidence in the government's governance model, developmental agenda, and political leadership.

From this perspective, the opposition's reduced numbers are not the result of institutional exclusion but of democratic choice expressed through elections.

BJP leaders have repeatedly maintained that a strong mandate allows the government to pursue policy decisions more efficiently and implement developmental programmes without prolonged political obstruction.

At the same time, political analysts caution that parliamentary democracy requires more than numerical majorities. The strength of democratic institutions, they argue, depends equally on the presence of effective scrutiny mechanisms and meaningful opposition participation.

Historically, the Leader of Opposition has played an important role not only inside legislative debates but also in appointments to various statutory bodies and committees. In many cases across India, the LoP participates in selection panels for constitutional and institutional appointments, thereby ensuring bipartisan consul-

tion.

Although the exact implications in Assam may depend on legal interpretation and procedural adjustments, the symbolic vacuum created by the absence of an LoP remains politically significant.

The development also highlights the fragmented nature of Assam's opposition space beyond the Congress.

Regional parties such as Rajiour Dal and smaller opposition formations continue to maintain pockets of influence, but none possess the numerical strength necessary to alter the broader balance inside the Assembly.

Rajiour Dal chief Akhil Gogoi remains among the most vocal opposition faces in the state, particularly on issues concerning land rights, identity politics, and social justice. However, the fragmented opposition structure has made coordinated resistance increasingly difficult.

The Congress leadership, meanwhile, faces mounting internal pressure to reassess its strategy following yet another electoral setback.

Party workers and observers believe the Congress must now decide whether to continue relying on traditional electoral methods or adopt a more aggressive grassroots approach capable of countering the BJP's political machinery.

Questions are also being raised about leadership renewal within the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee and the party's long-term ideological positioning in the state.

While some within the party advocate stronger alliances with regional forces, others argue that the Congress must rebuild independently if it wishes to regain political credibility.

The absence of an LoP could further complicate these challenges by limiting the party's institutional visibility inside the Assembly.

As Assam prepares for the 16th Legislative Assembly session beginning later this month, attention is now shifting toward how opposition parties will function in practical terms within the House.

Much will depend on the Speaker's interpretation of Assembly conventions and procedural norms. While the Assembly can continue functioning without an officially recognised LoP, the political optics of such a situation are likely to remain contentious.

For many observers, the debate ultimately goes beyond one designation or one political party. It raises deeper questions about the evolving character of democracy in Assam: Can legislative accountability remain robust when opposition numbers shrink drastically? How can dissenting voices remain institutionally effective in the face of overwhelming majorities? And what happens when electoral dominance begins to reshape the balance between government authority and parliamentary scrutiny?

These questions are likely to define Assam's political discourse in the years ahead.

The BJP-led NDA has unquestionably secured one of the most decisive mandates in the state's history. But alongside that victory comes an equally historic development - the possibility that Assam may, for the first time, function without an officially recognised Leader of Opposition.

As the new government begins its second term under Himanta Biswa Sarma, the spotlight will therefore not only remain on governance and development, but also on whether the state's democratic institutions can maintain meaningful checks and balances in the absence of a formally acknowledged opposition leader.

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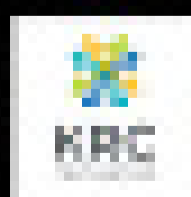


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