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PERSPECTIVE

Friendship isn't about who you've known the longest. It's about who walked into your life, said "I'm here for you" and proved it.

AIUDF Raises Concerns Over Pushback Policy, UCC and Evictions in Memorandum to Assam CM

GUWAHATI
The All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) on July 8 submitted a memorandum to Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, voicing concerns over the implementation of the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), eviction drives, the handling of alleged illegal immigrants and law-and-order issues in the state.

Addressing the media, AIUDF spokesperson Rafikul Islam said the party supports action against illegal immigrants but expressed concern over reports of individuals allegedly being pushed back across the international border without adequate verification. The party urged the state government to ensure proper coordination with the Government of Bangladesh before carrying out any such exercise and to prevent genuine Indian citizens from being affected.

"Action against illegal immigrants is acceptable if the individuals concerned are genuinely foreign nationals. However, the government should engage with Bangladesh and follow due procedures before undertaking any pushback operation," Islam said, referring to the position earlier articulated by AIUDF president Badruddin Ajmal.

The AIUDF alleged that there have been instances where legitimate Indian citizens were being subjected to uncertainty during anti-infiltration measures and called for safeguards to ensure that no genuine citizen is wrongfully targeted.

On the proposed Uniform Civil Code, the party reiterated its opposition and demanded that the proposal be withdrawn. According to the AIUDF, the current framework does not adequately reflect the diversity of personal laws followed by different communities.

WHO SAID WHAT

As the U.S.-India defense partnership grows, cooperation in technology, innovation, and interoperability continues to strengthen the ability of both nations. From maritime surveillance to strategic airlift and advanced rescue operations, American-made defense platforms are playing a key role in boosting the operational readiness and effectiveness of India's armed forces. - US Embassy in India

STRONGER TOGETHER. SAFER TOGETHER.

Imphal-Jiribam Highway to Be Ready by Dec 2026, Assures NHIDCL

BISWADEEP GUPTA

IMPHAL : For decades, the fate of Manipur has been tied not merely to politics or policy but to the condition of its highways. Every bag of rice, every cylinder of cooking gas, every truck carrying medicines, construction materials and essential commodities must traverse roads that snake through fragile hills before reaching the landlocked state. Among these roads, National Highway-37 (Imphal-Jiribam Road) has acquired unprecedented strategic importance over the past three years.

Recognising its strategic significance, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) launched a ₹1,300-crore project in 2022 to widen and upgrade 203-km out of the total stretch of 224-km of the Imphal-Jiribam highway into an all-weather road. Four years later, while the project has visibly transformed large sections of the highway, the road is yet to live up to its promise of becoming a reliable all-season corridor.

Until recently, public opinion had largely favoured the project. Long stretches of newly improved road considerably reduced travel time, and modern Reinforced Cement Concrete (RCC) bridges replaced the ageing Bailey bridges that had long restricted the movement of heavy vehicles. Frequent travellers recall that the journey from Imphal to Jiribam, which once took 7-



8 hours or more, has been reduced to around 4 to 5 hours.

However, the arrival of the monsoon has once again exposed the highway's vulnerabilities. "With just a little rain, we are back to square one," said a regular commuter who frequently travels between Imphal and Silchar. According to him, potholes, waterlogged stretches and landslides have pushed the travel time back to 7 or 8 hours. What had begun to look like a modern highway is once again testing the patience of commuters and transporters alike.

The disappointment stems not merely from the deteriorating condition of the road but from the expecta-

tion that the project was meant to create an all-weather highway capable of withstanding precisely such seasonal challenges.

Construction on NH-37 has been progressing under seven separate packages since 2022. According to the National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited (NHIDCL), Packages I and III have already been completed, while the remaining five packages have achieved between 85 and 90 per cent progress. Dense Bituminous Macadam has been laid over nearly 190 kilometres of the highway, and the Union Government has already released ₹1,040 crore, or nearly 80 per cent of the sanc-

tioned project cost.

One of the project's most visible achievements has been the construction of permanent RCC bridges over the Irang, Barak and Makru rivers, replacing the narrow Bailey bridges that had served as major traffic bottlenecks for decades. These structures have significantly improved the movement of heavy vehicles and enhanced the highway's carrying capacity.

Yet the road itself continues to face recurring damage during the rainy season.

NHIDCL attributes the delay to a combination of technical, administrative and local challenges. Deputy General Manager Rafique Ahmad Choudhury said the project was slowed by extensive surveys, land-related disputes, natural calamities and protests by roadside villagers. In one instance, around 488 households in the Package II stretch sought compensation, although the land they occupied fell within a Protected Forest, making it ineligible for compensation under existing rules. The issue was eventually resolved after the Manipur Cabinet approved an ex gratia payment of ₹70,000 per household on humanitarian grounds. "The negotiation process took considerable time," he said.

He further pointed out that since the ethnic conflict of May 2023 and the frequent closure of NH-02, traffic on NH-37

has increased dramatically. Daily convoys of 3 to 4 have nearly doubled, with close to 1,000 vehicles now using the highway every day, accelerating the wear and tear on stretches that are still under construction. Road engineers explain that pavement layers under construction are especially vulnerable to such traffic before the final wearing course is completed. Combined with prolonged rainfall, the deterioration has accelerated.

The agency has identified six critical locations—Keiphundai, Shantikhounou, Barak, Nungba, Rengpang and Irang—as the worst affected stretches. NHIDCL has assured that these damaged portions, along with other problematic sections, will be restored to a comfortable motorable condition by July and that the entire project will be completed by December 2026.

However, transporters remain unconvinced. The All Manipur Road Transport Drivers and Motor Workers Union has criticised NHIDCL's pace of work and questioned the quality of maintenance. The union alleges that blocked roadside drains allow rainwater to flow across the carriageway, rapidly damaging newly constructed sections. It has also blamed repeated landslides on steep vertical hill cutting during road widening. Recently, truckers reported that hundreds of vehicles remained stranded after landslides and

poor road conditions disrupted traffic between Noney and Nungba, even as repair work allegedly slowed.

NHIDCL has rejected these allegations, maintaining that repair works are continuing in full swing and that diversions are being provided wherever required.

The debate reflects a larger developmental challenge. For a landlocked state like Manipur, road connectivity is not merely about convenience but about economic resilience. Every disruption affects the supply of food, fuel, medicines and other essential commodities. As NH-02 continues to face periodic blockades, NH-37 has become indispensable to the state's economy.

The visible progress achieved over the past four years demonstrates that the project is moving in the right direction. Yet, for the people who depend on this highway every day, success will not be measured by kilometres completed or funds released. It will be judged by a simpler benchmark—whether the road remains safe and motorable during the monsoon.

With NHIDCL promising completion by the end of 2026, the coming months will determine whether NH-37 finally fulfils its long-awaited role as Manipur's true all-weather lifeline or remains another infrastructure project whose promise is repeatedly washed away by the rains.

Manipur Honours Assam Rifles Personnel Killed in Ukhrul Ambush; Search Operations Intensified

IMPHAL

The Manipur government on July 8 paid tribute to two Assam Rifles personnel who were killed in an ambush by unidentified armed assailants in Ukhrul district earlier this week, with a wreath-laying ceremony held at Imphal International Airport.

The ceremony, organised by the Assam Rifles, saw senior state officials, security personnel and military officers gather to honour the sacrifice of the two soldiers who lost their lives in the line of duty.

Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh, Home Minister Govindas Konthoujam, Director General of Police Rajiv Singh, Additional Director General of Police L Dorjee, Inspector General of Assam Rifles (South) Major General Gaurav Sharma, Inspector General of Police, CRPF, Rajendra Narayan Dash, and other senior civil, police and military officials laid wreaths and paid floral tributes to the fallen personnel.



The deceased were identified as Warrant Officer Balwan Singh and Havildar Chandra Mohan Singh of the 40th Battalion of the

Assam Rifles. Both personnel were killed on July 6 when their convoy came under attack while travelling through Ukhrul dis-

trict. According to police officials, the incident occurred at around 1.40 pm as a convoy of the 40th Battalion was returning to its base at Shangshak. The attack resulted in fatal injuries to the two soldiers, who died on the spot.

Speaking to media, Officer-in-Charge of Ukhrul Police Station Inspector Marchang W said the convoy was ambushed while en route to Shangshak.

"An ambush attack took place on the 40 Assam Rifles convoy on July 6 at approximately 1.40 pm while they were travelling to their base in Shangshak. Two personnel—Warrant Officer Balwan Singh and Havildar Chandra Mohan Singh—sustained fatal injuries and died on the spot," he said.

Senior police officers, including the Superintendent of Police and Additional Superintendent of Police, rushed to the area immediately after the incident and secured the site.

A joint search operation involving personnel of the Manipur Police and the Assam Rifles

from Ukhrul and Shangshak was launched soon after the attack. Security forces have since intensified combing operations in the surrounding areas to trace those responsible.

Officials said no arrests have been made so far, and investigations into the ambush remain underway.

The wreath-laying ceremony was held amid persistent rain, lending a sombre atmosphere to the final farewell. Security personnel stood in silent tribute as state leaders and military officials honoured the courage and service of the two soldiers.

The attack has once again highlighted the security challenges in Manipur's hill districts, where security forces continue to conduct operations against armed groups and work to maintain stability in sensitive areas.

Authorities said efforts to identify and apprehend the perpetrators are continuing, with security agencies maintaining heightened vigilance across the region.

Cachar all set for FIFA World Cup excitement as CM Fan Park opens at DSA Stadium from July 9

SILCHAR

The District Administration, Cachar, has completed all preparations for the launch of the Chief Minister's FIFA Fan Park at DSA Stadium, Silchar, where football enthusiasts will be able to watch live telecasts of the FIFA World Cup matches on a giant LED screen from July 9 to the tournament final on July 20, 2026.

To brief the media on the arrangements, District Commissioner Rahul Kumar Gupta, IAS addressed a press conference at the Old Conference Hall of the District Commissioner's Office here on Tuesday. He was accompanied by Additional District Commissioner Devid Kumar Borah, ACS and Additional District Commissioner Jagriti Kalwar, ACS.

Addressing media representatives, the District Commissioner said that the Fan Park has been planned to provide football lovers across Barak Valley with a safe, vibrant and community-oriented venue where they can experience the excitement of the FIFA World Cup together. He informed that all matches from July 9 till the final will be streamed live on a giant LED screen at DSA Stadium, recreating the electrifying atmosphere of a stadium while ensuring adequate public convenience and safety.

DC Rahul Kumar Gupta said, "Football enjoys immense popularity in Barak Valley and this initiative will enable thousands of football enthusiasts to come together and celebrate

the spirit of the game. The District Administration has made comprehensive arrangements to ensure that families, young people and sports lovers can enjoy every match in a safe, secure and well-managed environment. We appeal to citizens to participate enthusiastically, maintain discipline, cooperate with the administration and make the CM Fan Park a memorable sporting celebration for everyone."

The District Commissioner further stated that the venue has been equipped with all necessary infrastructure including lighting, sound systems, security deployment and other essential public amenities. Necessary co-ordination has also been established among all concerned departments to ensure smooth management throughout the screening period.

It is worthy to mention here that the initiative follows the announcement made by Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma to expand the successful CM FIFA Fan Park concept beyond Guwahati and Dibrugarh. Following the overwhelming public response at the existing venues, the Government of Assam has extended the initiative to Jorhat and Silchar enabling football fans across different regions of the State to enjoy the quarter-finals, semi-finals and the final in a vibrant public viewing experience.

This is stated in a press release issued by the Regional Office of Information & Public Relations, Barak Valley Zone, Silchar, Assam.



IMD Warns of Thunderstorms, Lightning and Gusty Winds Across Northeast This Week

GUWAHATI

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has forecast thunderstorms accompanied by lightning and gusty winds across several northeastern states over the next three to four days, prompting authorities to advise residents to remain cautious amid the expected adverse weather conditions.

According to the IMD, the weather activity is likely to affect large parts of the Northeast, including Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura. The department said the prevailing atmospheric conditions are favourable for the development of thunderstorms, which may be accompanied by lightning strikes and strong surface winds in isolated areas.

The forecast comes as several parts of the region continue to experience active monsoon conditions, with intermittent rainfall and changing weather patterns reported in recent days. Apart from the northeastern states, the IMD has also predicted similar weather conditions over parts of Gangetic West Bengal and Chhattisgarh, indicating a broader zone of atmospheric instability across eastern and central India. Meteorological officials have urged people to exercise caution during thunderstorms, particularly in open areas, agricultural fields and locations vulnerable to lightning strikes. Residents have been advised to stay indoors during severe weather events, avoid taking shelter under isolated trees and follow weather advisories issued by local authorities. The department also cautioned that gusty winds associated with thunderstorms could lead to minor damage to temporary structures, disruption of outdoor activities and localised interruptions to transport services in some areas. With monsoon systems remaining active across the region, weather experts expect periodic spells of rain and thunderstorm activity to continue over the coming days.

Assam Aims for Fully Equipped Government Schools by 2027; 676 Still Without Electricity



GUWAHATI

Assam Education Minister Ranaj Pegu has said that 676 government schools across the state are still without electricity, while 283 schools do not yet have boys' toilets, as the government pushes to ensure all educational institutions are equipped with basic infrastructure by March 2027.

Sharing the details on social media platform X, Pegu said the schools lacking electricity constitute just 1.53 per cent of the state's 44,243 government schools. To address the shortfall, the government has earmarked Rs 4 crore in the current financial year to provide power connections to all remaining schools.

The minister noted that while these institutions await grid connectivity, another 643 schools that do not have access to conventional electricity have already been provided with solar power systems to support their daily operations and educational activities.

Highlighting progress in sanitation infrastructure, Pegu said all government schools in Assam now have dedicated toilet facilities for girls. However, 283 schools around

0.64 per cent of the total are yet to be provided with boys' toilets. Construction work for these facilities has already commenced during the ongoing financial year, he added.

The minister also pointed to significant strides in strengthening digital learning infrastructure across the state's education system. Of the 10,965 schools directly managed by the Assam government, 10,033 have already been equipped with at least one digital education facility, including Information and Communication Technology (ICT) laboratories, Tele-Education centres or Smart Classrooms.

According to the data shared by the minister, only a small number of schools remain outside the digital network. The government plans to establish ICT laboratories in 328 additional schools during the current financial year, which will further reduce the number of institutions without digital learning facilities to 608.

Pegu said a roadmap has been prepared to extend digital infrastructure to all remaining schools in the next financial year. The objective, he added, is to ensure that every government school in Assam has access to essential educational and physical infrastructure by March 2027.

The state's efforts form part of a broader push to improve learning conditions, bridge infrastructure gaps and expand access to technology-enabled education, particularly in rural and remote areas. Officials believe that universal access to electricity, sanitation and digital facilities will play a key role in enhancing the quality of education and creating a more inclusive learning environment across Assam.



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US-IRAN TALKS

The US seeks everything in a hurry, unwilling to understand that others do not follow the same timetable. This desperation of the US is justified because every administration looks at its own term in office, ignoring long-term interests. This is Trump's last tenure and about 18 months have already elapsed. If any deal, currently under negotiations, is not inked as per their needs, it may never come through. The longer the negotiations, the less likely are chances of them being signed.

US-India trade talks have dragged for months, with the US Ambassador to India mentioning on multiple occasions that it is almost complete. On the contrary, India has displayed that it is not in a rush unless its core interests are protected. While Trump will not return, the same cannot be said of the Modi led Indian Government.

Similar is the case with the US-Iran deal, post the ceasefire and inking of the MOU. Trump fails to realize that two months to reach an agreement with a country on its long-term nuclear program as also surrendering its stockpiles is a rather short period. The Iranian government needs to convince its people that it is the right step. The JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), also termed as the Iran Nuclear Deal, negotiated by the P5+1 (US, UK, France, China, Russia, plus Germany), from which Trump walked out in 2017, took five years before being approved.

Trump's threats on attacks on Iran's infrastructure have not worked. Iran has not been browbeaten in the conflict and is willing for dialogue only because it feels that released funds and oil exports would restructure its economy. It has suffered militarily but the regime remains intact, possibly more hardline. It is aware that war is not a solution and peace will provide it stability and enable it to handle Israel in the long-term.

Pressure has remained on Trump from Middle Eastern nations who fear their oil infrastructure would be targeted in case the US again attacks Iran. Even Europe has refused to back Trump. The US economy is on a downside as also cost of continuing the conflict is becoming expensive for the US taxpayer. Trump has been forced to reign in Netanyahu and limit Israel's attacks in Lebanon.

Iran's concern with Lebanon is multi-fold. There are reports that Hezbollah has members of Iran's IRGC embedded in it as also its degradation will weaken Iran's hold on the region. Iran has thus placed ceasefire in Lebanon as a primary condition.

Neither side wants to display weakness. Trump mentioned last week, after a few days of attacks, that Iran has agreed to a meeting in Qatar. He even rushed his negotiators, Steve Witkoff and son-in-law Jared Kushner, for talks with Iranian officials. The meeting was denied by Tehran which mentioned that its members were visiting Qatar only to discuss with Qatari negotiators. Witkoff and Kushner also met Qatari negotiators. Indirect talks, conducted by Qatari mediators, was claimed to be positive.

It has been two weeks since the MOU was signed and there is no forward movement. The major rider holding back progress is adherence to terms in the MOU. The MOU mentions negotiations will commence on release of Iran's frozen funds as also lifting of sanctions on sale of its oil. Simultaneously, Iran must open the Straits of Hormuz, while US lifts its blockade. Peace should be restored in both, Iran and Lebanon.

The US now insists that funds would be released as talks progress, while Iran demands ships seek its permission before entering the straits. Simultaneously, it objects to vessels exploiting the route hugging the Omani coastline. Iran wants to ensure that its leverage over Hormuz remains, with or without the cooperation of Oman. This is its main hold on global oil and it would never let this go. War in Lebanon continues with Israel mentioning that it has informed the US of its intent to remain in parts of Lebanon. The US and Iran have traded fire with hopes of talks resuming.

In this confusion expecting a deal within two months is unlikely. Trump has his eyes on mid-term polls in the US due in November this year. He would also hope to stabilize the US economy by then and bring down inflation. If he maintains his hold on the US Congress, post the polls, there would be no further threat to his presidency till his tenure ends. By Nov even the future of Netanyahu would have been decided as Israel goes to polls in October. It is then that Trump may re-consider engaging Iran militarily. Iran is aware and is preparing for it, hence demanding release of its frozen funds on priority, without any pre-conditions, as mentioned by Vance recently. It may move from dollars to alternative currencies.

For a person like Trump, who has little patience and wants everything done by yesterday, this period of no progress for two weeks, post the signing of the MOU, is hurting. His rushing both, Witkoff and Kushner, to Qatar only on hearing that the Iranians would be coming indicates desperation and does not portray the US as a strong negotiator.

The most important gap yet to be bridged between both sides is trust. That is missing largely because neither is willing to be the first to adhere to the terms of the MOU. It is hoping that the other takes the first step. Iran's wants release of funds, a ceasefire in Lebanon with Israeli withdrawal, while the US wants Hormuz open, without riders. While a hotline to manage military issues has been established, there is no mechanism to ensure that the terms agreed are simultaneously implemented.

Further, Trump is under internal pressure from his opponents claiming that he surrendered to Iran, and hence is slowing down implementing US conditions agreed to in the MOU. What is worse and damaging are his comments on social media and to the press, most of which are countered and denied by Iran.

Trump has limited time to leave behind his legacy with an agreement better than the JCPOA, while the Iranian regime has no restriction. It can drag talks for ages without being politically impacted. Qatar, which has a hold on both nations must now work to bridge differences and bring about trust between the sides. The world needs it.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

If everything seems under control, you're just not going fast enough. - Mario Andretti

RAM MANDIR THEFT, HINDU NATIONALISM, AND POLITICS



S GURUMURTHY

The cash theft at Ram Mandir that dominates national and international media headlines, has escalated into a massive political controversy, recalling the ideological conflicts of the 1990s. Just as the Mandir movement assumed immense political significance then, the theft at the temple too has gained political traction with the assembly elections in UP, the nerve centre of the Mandir movement, just months away.

While this political interest is natural and understandable, the situation today presents a stark difference. The Mandir movement then did not have to face today's hyper-competitive, minute-by-minute breaking news media. When such a frenzied media apparatus mixes with political agendas, truth can be uncovered only by taking a helicopter view that avoids the narratives arrested by contextual sensationalism.

The theft has miraculously transformed the erstwhile opponents of Ram Mandir into his ardent devotees chanting "Jai Shri Ram". The Congress party, which boycotted the 'Pran Pratishtha' ceremony in 2024, dispatched a nine-member high-level delegation for Ram Lala's darshan last week. Even if driven by pure political opportunism, this is a welcome development, as Mahatma Gandhi, whom it swears by, regarded "Ram Naam" as cure for all ills, national and personal.

Arvind Kejriwal, who had boycotted the 2024 Mandir ceremony, too has undergone instant metamorphosis into a Ram Bhakt, declaring that the theft had deeply pained all Sanatanis and announcing his Friday visit for darshan. Most ironically, when Mulayam Singh Yadav was Chief Minister in 1990, he ordered the police to fire and kill 16 kar sevaks and later proudly declared he would have issued the same order even if 30 had to die. Today, his Samajwadi Party sheds tears, claiming Ram Bhakts have been cheated.

The overexcited Indian media competing for breaking news, too joined this political chorus. One media predicted long-term damage to the BJP. Another claimed this was a severe setback to BJP's promise of Ram Rajya—the gold standard of probity in governance.

Capitalising on the geopolitical significance of the temple, global media entities with a history of anti-India and anti-Hindu bias, the Reuters, BBC, and Al-Jazeera, painted the incident as if it were a billion-dollar heist. "Stealing from the gods: India's Ram Temple hit by corruption scandal. The temple is mired in embezzlement allegations before crucial state elections, embarrassing PM Modi's government," screamed Al-Jazeera.

A theft—not corruption or a scam

What has happened at the Ram Mandir is a theft. A pilferage easily executed by lower-level staff handling cash. Not a corruption or a scam. It would be corruption only if the top management had attempted to hush it up. On the contrary, with-

in days of the theft coming to light, the higher-ups initiated severe, uncompromising action. There was no sign of an institutional cover-up which only will make it a scam.

Theft happens everywhere. To know the times we live in, one must recall Swami Chinmayananda's observation: "In the Krita Yuga, good and evil lived in different worlds (Devas and Asuras). In Treta Yuga, they existed in the same world (Ram and Ravana). In Dwapara Yuga, they were in the same family (Pandavas and Kauravas). But in Kali Yuga, they exist within the same human being." We live in Kali Yuga, where good and evil reside simultaneously in man.

When desire and greed overpower even inherently good people, crimes can occur in the most sacred of spaces—be it churches, mosques or temples. Stealing from a temple Hundi (donation box) is notoriously easy. As the C P Ramaswami Iyer Committee report on temple administration astutely noted, money dropped into a Hundi is sacred, but the moment it is taken out, it becomes mere currency notes. It was based on this very logic that the judiciary permitted secular governments to take over temple funds.

The true metric of integrity in any institution is not the absence of wrong doing—which is ideal—but the speed and decisiveness with which authorities respond to it. Covering up a theft is what constitutes corruption and fraud—usually orchestrated to protect higher-ups. The Bofors scandal was exposed in 1987. As it involved the then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, no FIR was registered till he was ousted from power. It was filed three years later, in 1990, after he was voted out. Let us examine the Ram Temple Trust's actions against this historical backdrop of cover-ups in recent cases of theft in temples involving the government as trustee.

The Ram Mandir theft is undoubtedly shocking and painful to anyone who cares about the nation's reputation symbolised by the geopolitical reputation of the Mandir. Yet, the tsunami of hyperbolic news and allegations that obscured crucial facts, have unfairly cast an avoidable shadow on the national brand. Even neutral commentators have sadly failed to notice the sheer speed at which the Trust and the UP government acted, which was in direct contrast to similar instances of temple thefts, but was drowned out in the noise. Read on.

Speed of action: Govt temple Trusts versus Ram Mandir Trust

Recall the allegations of property misappropriation and idol thefts in government-administered temples in Sabarimala, Thiruvananthapuram, Puri, and Tamil Nadu. Comparing the response of the government bodies to that of the Ram Temple Trust reveals the stark difference between the Ram Mandir trust response and government-controlled Trusts in those cases. It doesn't need turning the pages of decades of history. Today, the AI tool brings the history with references on the computer screen. When AI tool Gemini was prompted to compare the scenarios

of how the Ram Mandir Trust and government Trusts in those cases acted, it replied: "Compared to how governments blocked and delayed action on allegations in temples under their control, the Ram Temple Trust's swift action is astonishingly different."

It noted that in cases like Sabarimala, Puri, and the Tamil Nadu idol thefts, the sheer inaction of government boards forced courts to intervene and order probes, delaying justice by years, sometimes decades. In stark contrast, the Ram Temple Trust requested the UP government to form a Special Investigation Team (SIT) within days of the crime coming to light.

The AI rightly summarised: "Driven by its ideology and self-esteem, the Ram Mandir Trust took immediate action. Conversely, government Trusts acted sluggishly in a bid to protect their systems and bureaucracy." (The very ideology that some media claimed would be tainted by this theft is precisely what catalysed such uncompromising action.)

The AI tool also said, "Furthermore, top officials of the Ram Temple took moral responsibility and resigned immediately. In government temple scandals, officials not only cling to their posts but fight legal battles using taxpayer money to protect their positions." It concluded: Everything regarding the Ram Mandir theft—from the SIT probe to the official report and mass arrests—happened in a matter of days.

Further, it said "the Trust voluntarily submitted its finances to a comprehensive five-year re-audit. Government-run temples routinely dodge external audits citing tradition or autonomy." An AI savvy 10th class student could have done this comparison by clicking the laptop mouse, which the multi trillion dollar global and India media in its excitement failed to do.

The unprecedented actions by the Ram Mandir Trust also clearly imply that this was a low-level theft, not a high-level scam. For political leaders, aided by the media, to suspect it as a high level affair is a tragedy. Now let us turn to the "stark contrast" in facts of the Ram Mandir Trust's action as compared to the temple Trusts mentioned.

June 4 to 26: A timeline of lightning-speed action

It is baffling that the media missed this stark contrast: government trusts covering up wrongs till courts intervene versus the Ram Mandir Trust acting against the wrong voluntarily, at lightning speed. See the chronology of facts:

June 4: First clue emerges. An unclaimed bag containing 2 lakh in cash found in a washroom in the Mandir complex. Trust officials immediately begin reviewing CCTV footage.

June 5: General Secretary Champat Rai orders an internal probe targeting key suspect Avinash Shukla. His house is raided, and 58 lakh is recovered before the police even arrive. Rai struck first against a man in his own inner circle. This severe crackdown terrified other accomplices into quietly depositing stolen

money back into bank accounts, leading the Trust to believe for a while that the issue could be resolved internally.

June 7: News of the recovery leaks, sparking wild rumours of stolen gold and silver. Rai, relying on preliminary assessments that the money could be fully recovered internally, states that audits showed no significant discrepancies.

June 13: Realising that assessment was wrong, the Trust formally requests the UP government to set

DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

"AI is impacting our children's learning, their friendships & how they view the world – and we are already seeing the cost."

@antonio gutierrez calls for a Child Safety Code to help keep children safe when using AI.

"No child should be a guinea pig for unregulated AI." ~ United Nations



up a high-level SIT probe. This six-day stagnation was the only delay in the entire action.

June 25: SIT probe reveals that Manish Yadav, a cash counter employee, repeatedly stole money by exploiting CCTV blind spots. An FIR is registered. Midnight raids are conducted with lightning speed into the early hours of June 26, resulting in eight arrests.

June 26: Taking absolute moral responsibility for the administrative lapses, General Secretary Champat Rai and Trustee Anil Mishra resign. Rai, an RSS pracharak who has dedicated his entire life to the nation, is a symbol of honesty and integrity. The media unfortunately drags him into the controversy, not mentioning that he was the first to initiate action ahead of the police.

Tomorrow, read how the theft may be less than half of 7.5 crore suspected by SIT, how pseudo-secular political forces are trying to weaponise the Mandir theft to smear the Hindu nationalist perspective, and how their chances of finding resonance in battleground UP are slim.

Naga and Meitei Groups Unite in Imphal Protest, Demand Justice for Conflict Victims

IMPHAL

In a rare display of solidarity amid Manipur's prolonged ethnic strife, members of the Naga and Meitei communities, along with representatives of several other groups, staged a joint sit-in protest at the historic Khwairamband Ima Market on Tuesday, demanding justice for victims of the ongoing conflict and calling for urgent political intervention to restore peace.

The demonstration was organised by the Naga People Union Imphal, the Imphal Naga Business Association, the Foothill Naga Coordination Committee, Khwairamband Nupi Keithel, Ima Gi Meira and the Committee on Coordinated Response and Rehabilitation.

Participants included members of the Naga, Meitei and Meitei Pangal



communities, as well as other non-Manipuri groups residing in the state.

The protesters urged the government to convene a special or monsoon

session of the Manipur Legislative Assembly to hold a comprehensive discussion on measures needed to restore peace and normalcy. They also demanded the revocation of the Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreements with Kuki armed groups, an end to what they described as a "proxy war," and the release of volunteers from both the Naga and Meitei communities who have been arrested in connection with the conflict.

Speaking on the sidelines of the protest, Ima Gi Meira convenor Sujata Thokchom alleged that indigenous Naga and Meitei communities had suffered heavily during the violence and accused authorities of failing to ensure justice for those affected.

Referring to the killing of six Naga civilians who were reportedly abducted

and murdered more than a month ago, she claimed that despite allegations linking members of a Kuki group to the incident, no meaningful action had been taken against those responsible.

Thokchom said earlier protests organised by individual communities had failed to elicit a satisfactory response from the authorities, leading various groups to come together for a united demonstration.

Naga activist Ashang Kasar also criticised the government's handling of the case, alleging that the bodies of the six victims remain at the mortuary of the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences nearly 40 days after the killings, while their families continue to await justice.

Questioning the government's response, Kasar argued that the pro-

longed delay in identifying and prosecuting those responsible had deepened public frustration and raised concerns over the handling of the case.

The joint protest is notable because it brought together Naga and Meitei organisations at a time when Manipur continues to grapple with deep social and political divisions arising from the ethnic conflict that erupted in May 2023.

There was no immediate response from the state government regarding the allegations and demands raised during Tuesday's demonstration. However, the protest highlighted growing calls from civil society groups for accountability, justice for victims and renewed efforts to find a lasting political solution to the crisis that has affected communities across Manipur for more than three years.

IMD Issues Orange Alert in Four Tripura Districts as Heavy Rainfall Set to Continue

AGARTALA

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has forecast heavy to very heavy rainfall across Tripura over the next three days, prompting an Orange Alert for four districts and cautioning residents about the possibility of waterlogging, localised flooding and weather-related disruptions.

According to the Meteorological Centre in Agartala, West Tripura, Khowai, Dhalai and Gomati districts are likely to experience heavy to very heavy rainfall at isolated locations on July 8. In view of the expected weather conditions, the IMD has issued an Orange Warning for these districts. The remaining districts of the state are under a Yellow Warning, indicating the likelihood of heavy rainfall at isolated places.

The weather department has also placed all eight districts of Tripura under a Yellow Warning for July 9, signalling the continuation of widespread rainfall activity across the state. On July 10, heavy rainfall is expected at isolated locations in West Tripura, Khowai, Sepahijala, Gomati and South Tripura districts.

Meteorologists attributed the prevailing weather pattern to a combination of active atmospheric systems influencing eastern and northeastern India.

The IMD said a seasonal trough currently extends from southwest Rajasthan to northeast Bangladesh, passing through the centre of a well-marked low-pressure area over northwest Madhya Pradesh and adjoining southwest Uttar Pradesh.

The trough further stretches across north Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Gangetic West Bengal.

In addition, an upper-air cyclonic circulation persists over northeast Assam at an altitude of up to 3.1 kilometres above mean sea level. The interaction of these systems is expected to enhance moisture inflow over Tripura, creating favourable conditions for widespread and intense rainfall during the next several days.

Akhil Gogoi's E20 Fuel Protest Triggers Stormy Debate in Assam Assembly

GUWAHATI

A protest by Rajior Dal chief and Sivasagar MLA Akhil Gogoi against the Centre's ethanol-blended fuel policy sparked sharp exchanges in the Assam Legislative Assembly on Tuesday, overshadowing proceedings during the second day of the Budget Session. Ahead of the commencement of the day's business, Gogoi staged a demonstration at the Assembly premises, pushing a motorcycle mounted on a handcart to symbolise what he described as the adverse impact of E20 fuel on vehicle owners.

The legislator alleged that the introduction of E20 petrol - fuel blended with 20 per cent ethanol - had damaged vehicles and imposed an additional financial burden on middle-class consumers.

Claiming that the policy had negatively affected millions of vehicle owners, Gogoi demanded that consumers be given the option of choosing between E20 fuel and conventional petrol.

"The limit of exploitation has been crossed. Vehicles belonging to

ordinary people are being damaged. People should have the freedom to choose between E20 fuel and normal petrol," he told reporters outside the Assembly.

He also questioned whether ethanol blending had produced any tangible benefit for consumers, arguing that fuel prices had not declined despite the policy's implementation.

The demonstration soon became the subject of a heated debate inside the House, with Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pijush Hazarika objecting to legislators staging protests within the Assembly complex on matters not formally raised during proceedings.

Stressing that the Assembly was meant for legislative business rather than demonstrations, Hazarika pointed out that Assam already has a designated protest venue at Chachal in Guwahati.

He further argued that a trend had emerged in recent years in which some legislators preferred public demonstrations and media interactions over raising issues through established parliamentary procedures.

Assam Plans Heritage Tourism Push for Historic Badarpur Fort While Prioritising Conservation

GUWAHATI

The Assam government has outlined plans to develop the historic Badarpur Fort in Sribhumi district as a major heritage tourism destination, while emphasising that all future initiatives will focus on preserving the monument's historical and archaeological integrity.

Tourism Minister Ajanta Neog informed the Assembly on Tuesday that the state is pursuing a coordinated strategy to conserve and promote the centuries-old fort, which she described as one of Assam's significant heritage assets with considerable tourism potential.

Replying to a question raised by BJP MLA Kamalakhya Dey Purkayastha during the Budget Session, Neog said the government had already completed restoration and protection works at the site and would undertake future tourism-related projects in consultation with the Directorate of



Archaeology. Describing the fort's historical importance, the minister said the monument stands on the left bank of the Barak River at Badarpur Ghat and is closely linked to the history of the Dimasa Kachari Kingdom. According to historical accounts, it was constructed during the reign of Dimasa ruler Govinda Chandra using high-quality burnt bricks.

Neog noted that the fort's unique architectural features, defensive design and historical relevance make it one of the state's notable heritage landmarks. She added that the site is protected under the Assam Ancient Monuments and Records Act, 1959, and

is maintained by the Directorate of Archaeology.

Highlighting the government's conservation efforts, the minister said Rs 50 lakh was sanctioned during the 2023-24 financial year for restoration, conservation and protective measures at the monument. The work has since been completed.

She reiterated that any future tourism development at the site would be carried out strictly in accordance with existing laws and heritage conservation guidelines.

"The objective is to preserve the fort's historical authenticity while promoting it as an important heritage tourism destination," Neog told the House.

The minister also referred to local traditions and historical records suggesting that the historic Badarpur Treaty was signed at the fort, further enhancing its cultural and historical significance.

During the discussion, MLA Kamalakhya Dey Purkayastha called for greater recognition of

the monument's Dimasa heritage. He argued that historical evidence indicates the fort was built during the reign of King Govinda Chandra rather than by Shah Baduruddin, a belief that has often been associated with the site.

Purkayastha urged the government to consider renaming the monument as the Govinda Chandra Memorial Fort, install a statue of the Dimasa ruler and provide visitors with a detailed historical account of the fort's origins and significance.

Situated at Badarpur Ghat along the Barak River, the fort remains one of southern Assam's most important archaeological sites, carrying historical associations with both the Dimasa Kachari kingdom and the landmark Badarpur Treaty. With conservation work already completed, the government now hopes to position the monument as a key destination on Assam's heritage tourism map while ensuring the preservation of its historical legacy.

Firing Along Assam-Arunachal Border Triggers Tension in Behali Forest

BISWANATH

Fresh tensions erupted along the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border on Tuesday after alleged armed miscreants opened fire on forest personnel inside the Behali Reserved Forest in Assam's Biswanath district while they were attempting to prevent illegal tree felling.

According to officials, around 16 rounds were fired at forest guards, forcing them to withdraw from the area. No injuries were reported, but the incident has heightened concerns over recurring encroachments and illegal logging activities in the sensitive border region.

A team led by Sonitpur MP Ranjit Dutta, accompanied by Biswanath Deputy Commissioner Karabi Saikia Karan, senior police officers and forest department officials, later visited the site to assess the situation. Forest guards briefed the delegation on the

alleged attack and the circumstances leading up to the firing.

Speaking to reporters, Dutta alleged that illegal logging within the reserve forest has persisted for years and claimed that individuals from across the inter-state border had stepped up such activities following the recently concluded Assam Assembly elections.

He contended that a reduced security presence in forested areas after the polls had emboldened miscreants to intensify illegal felling operations. Stressing that the disputed forest land falls within Assam's jurisdiction, Dutta asserted that no external claim over the territory would be accepted.

The BJP MP said Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma had been apprised of the situation and was closely monitoring developments. He noted that the Behali Reserved Forest and adjoining stretches have remained

sensitive ever since Arunachal Pradesh was separated from Assam in 1972. Dutta further pointed out that substantial progress had been achieved in resolving the long-standing boundary dispute through negotiations between the chief ministers of the two states and regional committees since 2021. However, he said unresolved issues linked to the Papum Pare sector continue to remain a source of concern, despite progress in settling disputes in the Pakke-Kessang sector. He also stated that allegations of illegal extraction of timber from Assam's forest areas would be thoroughly investigated. Deputy Commissioner Karabi Saikia Karan said the district administration had recently inspected Dikal Camp and Radha Suk Camp following reports of renewed tensions in the area.

During a visit to Radha Suk Camp, officials reportedly found evidence of

ongoing tree felling and interacted with local residents. Karan revealed that the administration had already informed the state government about minor clashes and related incidents on June 23, based on reports submitted by both the Superintendent of Police and the Divisional Forest Officer.

She said a fresh report detailing Tuesday's firing incident would now be forwarded to the government, adding that the forest department had formally notified the administration about the alleged attack on its personnel. The latest incident comes months after Assam and Arunachal Pradesh initiated the process of implementing their boundary settlement agreement. In February this year, officials from both states began jointly installing boundary pillars along the Pakke-Kessang-Biswanath sector with technical support from the Survey of India.

Ajmal Demands 'Shoot-at-Sight' Policy Against Drug Traffickers

GUWAHATI

AIUDF president and Dhubri MP Badruddin Ajmal on Tuesday called for the harshest possible measures against drug traffickers, including "shoot-at-sight" orders, police encounters and even capital punishment, arguing that Assam's escalating narcotics crisis requires extraordinary intervention.

Speaking to reporters outside the Assam Legislative Assembly during the ongoing Budget Session, Ajmal said the drug problem had reached an alarming level and could no longer be addressed through legislation alone.

"Hardly any household has remained untouched by the drug menace. The situation has become extremely serious. Laws alone will not be enough to solve the problem," he said.

While supporting the government's efforts to establish rehabilitation centres for individuals struggling with addiction, the AIUDF leader stressed that rehabilitation must be complemented by an uncompromising crackdown on drug trafficking networks.

According to Ajmal, major traffickers should face stringent action, including police encounters, to de-

ter the spread of narcotics across the state.

"Rehabilitation facilities are necessary, but at the same time the government must act firmly against major drug traffickers. Unless strict and exemplary action is taken, this menace cannot be eliminated," he said.

Escalating his demand, Ajmal urged authorities to adopt a "shoot-at-sight" policy against those involved in the illegal drug trade, describing traffickers as individuals responsible for devastating families and communities.

"Drug dealers are destroying lives and tearing families apart. The government should consider the toughest possible action against those engaged in this trade. Without strong deterrence, these networks will continue to operate," he said.

Ajmal also criticised legal representation for individuals convicted in drug-related offences, alleging that access to legal assistance often allows traffickers to avoid punishment.

He suggested that lawyers defending convicted drug traffickers should face professional scrutiny, a remark likely to spark debate among legal and civil rights groups.

148 Newborn Deaths in Three Months Expose Deep Healthcare Gaps Across Barak Valley

SILCHAR

The deaths of 148 newborns across Barak Valley over the past three months have brought renewed attention to persistent shortcomings in maternal and neonatal healthcare, particularly in rural areas where inadequate medical infrastructure, delayed referrals and limited access to specialised treatment continue to pose serious challenges.

According to official data, Cachar reported the highest number of neonatal deaths at 74, followed by 49 in Sribhumi district and 25 in Hailakandi during the period under review.

Health authorities said the fatalities were largely linked to birth asphyxia resulting in respiratory distress, extremely low birth weight, severe neonatal infections and delays in transferring critically ill infants from remote locations to advanced healthcare centres.

Officials acknowledged that access to specialised neonatal care remains a major concern in several parts of the valley. Sribhumi Joint Director of Health Services Matindra Sutradhar noted that poor road connectivity and the absence of advanced newborn care facilities in



peripheral health institutions often hamper timely treatment for babies requiring urgent medical intervention.

While the health department attributed most of the deaths to medical complications, local residents and healthcare activists argued that the fragile state of rural healthcare infrastructure has significantly con-

tributed to the crisis.

Concerns have been particularly pronounced in Sribhumi's Ramkrishnanagar subdivision, where residents alleged that key healthcare facilities, including Dullavcherra Model Hospital and Ramkrishnanagar Block Primary Health Centre, do not have ultrasound diagnostic services or caesarean section

facilities. As a result, women with high-risk pregnancies are frequently referred to larger institutions outside the area.

Expectant mothers are often sent to Sribhumi Civil Hospital, Hailakandi Civil Hospital or Christian Mission Hospital for specialised treatment. Residents said the long distances involved, coupled with poor road conditions, frequently lead to delays during obstetric emergencies, increasing risks for both mothers and newborns.

Public health experts stressed that a significant number of neonatal deaths can be prevented through regular antenatal check-ups, early identification of high-risk pregnancies and improved prenatal care. They also emphasised the need to expand specialised newborn care infrastructure, including Special Newborn Care Units (SNCUs) and Newborn Stabilisation Units (NBSUs), across rural healthcare facilities.

The proposed medical college at Ramkrishnanagar has generated optimism about improving healthcare services in the region in the future. However, residents maintained that immediate measures are needed to strengthen existing institutions. They called for the introduction of caesarean section services, ultrasound facilities, specialist doctors and trained neonatal healthcare personnel at Dullavcherra Model Hospital and Ramkrishnanagar BPHC to address the growing healthcare burden and reduce preventable newborn deaths.

Quest!

A report by the World Health Organisation says that worldwide, alcohol kills 1 person every 10 seconds.

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India's focus on development, not expansionism: PM Modi tells Indonesian parliament



NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday told the Indonesian parliament that India's focus is on development and not expansionism, amid growing concerns in South East Asia over China's expansionist behaviour in the Indo-Pacific region.

In his address to the lawmakers, that included President Prabowo Subianto and top ministers, Modi called for further expansion of ties between the two nations and said the world will witness history in the making when 140 crore people of India and Indonesia's 29 crore citizens march together for shared prosperity.

"India is a strong advocate of a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. India believes in freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific," the prime minister said.

"India is a nation that follows the path of development, not expansionism," he said against the backdrop of rising concerns in South East Asia over China's increasing military muscle-flexing in the South China Sea and beyond.

In his remarks, Modi touched upon the various

facets of India-Indonesia ties since the 1950s, including how the two countries played a key role in the famous Bandung conference of 1955, and said that "unlimited opportunities" are waiting for the two sides in many sectors.

The 1955 Bandung Conference, hosted by Indonesia, brought together leaders from 29 Asian and African countries to promote world peace and advance cooperation among newly independent nations. It is widely regarded as laying the foundation for the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War.

"For India and Indonesia, the sea has never represented distance. It has always been a bridge between our nations and remains central to our shared future," Modi said in his address.

"When India and Indonesia stand together, they strengthen the world's faith that democracy creates opportunities, democracy builds trust, and democracy shapes the future," the prime minister said.

Modi said India, Indonesia and the Indian Ocean are names that reflect the deep ties that bind the two nations.

"The goodwill and trust that India and Indonesia share

must create new opportunities for our citizens," he said.

The prime minister also spoke about anti-terror cooperation between the two nations under the existing framework of a joint working group.

India and Indonesia can strengthen peace-loving forces by expanding cooperation to counter cyber threat, terror funding and radicalisation, he said. Highlighting the current geopolitical environment, the prime minister said India firmly believes that reform of the UN Security Council can no longer be delayed. Modi landed in Jakarta on Monday to a red-carpet welcome in the first leg of his three-nation tour - which will also cover Australia and New Zealand - to shore up trade and security cooperation under the framework of the India-Indonesia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of 2018.

His address at the Indonesian parliament on Tuesday came hours after he held wide-ranging talks with President Subianto, with the two sides signing nearly a dozen agreements to expand cooperation in areas including defence, critical minerals, technology, food security, medicines and maritime security.

Three killed, five missing as major landslide hits Wayanad tunnel project site

WAYANAD

At least three people were killed while another five are missing after a major landslide struck a tunnel road project site at Kalladi near Meppady in Kerala's Wayanad district on Tuesday.

The incident occurred near Meenakshi Bridge, where work on the Anakkompyil-Meppadi tunnel project connecting Malappuram and Wayanad districts is underway.

In a statement, the district administration said a total of 18 persons were affected by the disaster. Of them, three were killed, 10 are undergoing treatment at Meppadi WIMS Hospital, and the search is on for five others who are still missing.

Officials said those living in nearby areas were being evacuated.

A senior government official told reporters that there were no workers at the site and that those feared trapped under the mud were engineers and security staff.

"If work had been going on there, it would have been a bigger tragedy," she said.

A private bus reportedly used to ferry workers, which was parked at the site, was pushed into the nearby river by the landslide and was lying half-submerged as water flowed through it.

Sniffer dogs of the state police have been deployed at the site to trace those trapped under the thick mud, the statement said.

It also said facilities had been made available at the Mundakkai Forest Station and the Chooralmala church hall to shift locals, including members of tribal communities, stranded on both sides of the bridge.

Speaking to the media, Chief Minister V D Satheesan said the disaster was caused by the negligence of the contractors who failed to remove the huge quantity of mud accumulated near the construction site, despite warnings from the district administration and the Public Works Department.

Responding to a question from



reporters, Satheesan said that the non-issuance of an appropriate weather alert was not the reason for the landslide.

"The soil there is mixed with mud and has got a different texture. The scrap soil was kept there and that was not stable. The disaster management authority had examined the area and told the contractors to remove it. Failure to remove soil from the place caused this mishap," he said.

The CM reviewed the rescue operations with officials of the Kerala State Disaster Management Authority (KSDMA) at their office. "It is an unfortunate incident. Rescue efforts are going on," he said.

Minister AP Anil Kumar and T Siddique have been sent to the disaster-hit place to coordinate rescue activities.

Forces from Wayanad are engaged in rescue activities, and more forces are on the way from Kozhikode and other places, the CM added.

He said that necessary rescue

forces are reaching the area and the police as well as fire and rescue personnel were already deployed at the site.

Additionally, a defence force was ready at Thrissur for being deployed at the site if required, he said.

All the necessary systems for search and rescue will be in place as soon as possible, he assured.

Speaking to reporters after visiting the landslide site, North Zone DIG K Karthick said the deceased and the injured had been engaged in work at the construction site.

"One of the injured is a police sub-inspector who reached the spot for rescue operations. Apart from that, a woman resident of the area is also among the injured," he said.

Karthick said rescue teams were also trying to clear the road buried under the debris, as several people remained stranded on the other side of the landslide.

Earth-moving machinery was being used to remove the debris to ascertain whether anyone was trapped beneath it, and rescue oper-

ations would continue through the night, he said.

The IMD issued a red alert in the district on Tuesday, as very heavy rainfall was recorded in the Mananthavady and Vythiri areas during the day.

The alert was issued at 12.30 pm, after the landslide at the Kalladi tunnel project site in Wayanad at around 11 am.

The Anakkompyil-Meppadi tunnel project, which aims to improve connectivity between Malappuram and Wayanad districts, commenced last year.

The incident comes nearly two years after the devastating landslides that struck Wayanad in July 2024, when torrential rain triggered multiple slope failures in the Meppadi region, killing more than 400 people, leaving scores missing and causing widespread destruction in villages such as Chooralmala and Mundakkai.

The disaster was among the deadliest landslides in Kerala's history.

INTERNATIONAL

Yacht owners and public housing residents once shared Venezuela's coast. Now they share its ruin

CARABALLEDA

The rich and poor shared paradise in Caraballeda on Venezuela's Caribbean coast. Their apartments, a few with direct marina access and hundreds in public housing towers, stood on the same curving street and offered idyllic views of the white sandy beaches and crystal waters.

The yacht owners and public transit riders who shared this road epitomized the social integration that the government set out to accomplish. Many of them enjoying a holiday or resting at home on June 24 met the same fate when the ground shook so violently that their homes flattened in seconds.

Now, about 17,000 who survived also share the uncommon status of being homeless in Venezuela. As the official death toll climbs above 3,500, many must rely on a government that has been excoriated for its response to the tragedy and that has politicized housing in the past to figure out where they will live — if they will have a new home at all.

Housing has generally been the first aspiration for Venezuelan adults since the second half of the 20th century, when an oil bonanza allowed the government to fund housing complexes, the poor to build brick and cement shacks locally known as "ranchos," and the rich to buy second and third homes.

Even when the country's economy came undone in 2013, most Venezuelans still had a roof over their heads, be it by getting one handed out by the country's self-described socialist government, buying one at a deep discount from people desperate for cash to migrate, building ranchos on top of each other, and even invading abandoned homes.

Those in housing built by the ruling party of 27 years — currently helmed by acting President Delcy Rodríguez — do not hold the deeds to the property, but the homes allowed them to save



and keep entire families off the streets.

"It was their home, their house. It was an immense joy when they were assigned these houses here," Carlos Ortega said of the 12 apartments in Caraballeda that his relatives were assigned to more than a decade ago following years of financial struggles after a mudslide.

"Imagine, they were given a home after losing everything, but now they've lost everything, even their lives."

Only one of Ortega's siblings survived the collapse of the public housing towers, while his son, who lived in a ninth-floor apartment but was working at a convenience store when the earthquakes struck, is still missing more than a week after the disaster. Ortega hoped he might find him at a hospital, a shelter or one of the tent camps that have taken over public spaces and private parking lots.

Not far from where he took a break from removing the rubble that buried his family, people were assessing

flattened homes adjacent to a yacht club and some towed Jet Skis. There, rescuers were being handed cookies and other food on a plastic tray while standing on the rubble where the wife of a military general hoped he and their children would be found.

Government efforts to integrate different socioeconomic classes

Ronal Rodriguez, a researcher at the Venezuela Observatory at Colombia's Universidad del Rosario, explained that Venezuelan governments, even before the arrival of the fiery Hugo Chávez to the presidency in 1999, had tried to prevent socioeconomic segregation by building housing projects in or near areas that were considered exclusive. The strategy, he said, also gave them a political edge by diversifying the voter base in wealthier neighborhoods that tend to vote for the opposition.

But the homes built under Chávez's "Grand Housing Mission," which his successor, Nicolás Maduro, continued until the U.S. military deposed him in

January, came with a caveat: People never received a deed.

"What Chavismo tries to do is maintain political dependence," Rodriguez said of Chávez's political movement. "That is, if at any point you turn against me and stop supporting me, then I'll take away the roof I've given you."

This makes these residents vulnerable to the whims of the government once again, particularly when survivors have been vocal about the lack of government support in search and rescue efforts.

The government of Rodríguez, whose dismal response to the catastrophe has been decried by residents across the board, has not yet given any timelines for long-term housing recovery efforts.

The extent of damage is still unclear, but at least 10,000 structures, or about one-third, were damaged in Catia La Mar, a city west of Caraballeda also in La Guaira state, based on satellite imagery analyzed by Microsoft's AI for Good Lab. Older buildings, substandard construction and geography left many neighborhoods in Venezuela vulnerable to strong earthquakes.

Benito Mantilla, 68, now lives in a tent set up in a pharmacy parking lot in Catia La Mar after his privately owned home was damaged. His wife left for the Dominican Republic last week, but he decided to stay and try to find a job about 40 minutes away in the capital, Caracas, as the earthquakes also damaged his and his brother's car repair shop. Another woman also living in the parking lot was still hoping that the government would give her a home soon. Her daughter, she said, is part of the local organizers for the ruling party. Meanwhile, Caryuedi González, who bought her own home when she was 21, was hoping that her working-class home, half of which went down a ravine, could somehow be repaired.

Twin Damascus blasts leave 18 wounded during Macron's visit to Syria



DAMASCUS

Syrian authorities said 18 people were wounded by two blasts in central Damascus on Tuesday near the hotel where France's president spent the night, with the Elysee Palace saying his visit is ongoing.

The blasts came moments before Syrian state television announced Emmanuel Macron's arrival to the presidential palace to meet his counterpart Ahmed al-Sharaa. The French president, the first Western leader to visit Syria since the fall of longtime ruler Bashar al-Assad in 2024, will continue his visit, France's Elysee Palace said.

The Syrian interior ministry said that "18 people, including four police officers, were injured" as a result of the two explosions caused by "two improvised devices, the first of which was placed inside a car parked on the side of the road, while the second was placed inside a garbage container".

The ministry said the

devices exploded "while preparations were underway" to dismantle them.

A security source told earlier the bombs were placed near the Four Seasons hotel, where Macron had spent the night. AFP journalists heard at least one blast echo through Damascus before seeing a plume of smoke rising near the hotel, with security forces closing nearby roads and ambulances heading to the scene.

Macron had left the hotel before the blasts took place, and they were not heard by the French presidential convoy, according to two AFP journalists traveling with them.

An AFP photographer near the tourism ministry, opposite the hotel, saw windows damaged by one of the explosions, amid a heavy security presence.

The second explosion occurred near Victoria Bridge in central Damascus, about two hundred metres from the hotel.

"I saw three traffic police officers injured on the ground, before the area was evacuated and the roads leading to it were closed," Hamam Hammoud, a 37-year-old employee at a money exchange company, told.

Before arriving at the presidential palace, Macron held a meeting Tuesday morning with civil society representatives at the Four Seasons Hotel.

Immediately after the two explosions, hotel security took precautionary measures and asked those who had met with Macron to go to the hotel's parking garage and remain there for their safety, according to an attendee who spoke to

The explosions are the second since Thursday, when 10 people were killed in a bombing in a Damascus cafe.

The French president had postponed announcing the date of his visit to Damascus until his plane landed on Monday, for security reasons. This is a developing story.

Beyond E20: What the Ethanol Debate Reveals About India's Model of Governance

India's transition to E20 petrol—fuel blended with 20 per cent ethanol—has generated a vigorous national debate. Supporters see it as a bold step toward energy security, lower oil imports and reduced carbon emissions. Critics raise concerns about vehicle compatibility, fuel efficiency, environmental sustainability and the economic interests that stand to benefit from the policy. Yet the controversy surrounding E20 is about far more than fuel. It has become a window into a larger question: how does India govern change in a rapidly evolving world?

The debate touches the very heart of India's development model. It highlights the strengths and weaknesses of a governance style that is capable of moving an enormous nation toward ambitious goals with remarkable speed, often before every concern has been settled. The story of E20 is therefore not merely about engines, ethanol or emissions. It is about the way India conceives, implements and manages transformation.

India's Culture of Rapid Change
Over the past decade, India has repeatedly demonstrated an extraordinary ability to pursue large-scale reforms. From demonetisation and the Goods and Services Tax (GST) to digital payments, direct benefit transfers, sanitation campaigns and renewable energy expansion, the country has adopted a distinctive pattern of governance.

A policy objective is identified. A bold decision is announced. Administrative machinery is mobilised. Society experiences disruption. Adaptation follows. Adjustments are made. Eventually, a new normal emerges.

This model has produced undeniable achievements. India's digital payments revolution, for instance, has transformed everyday transactions at a scale unmatched by most countries. Welfare delivery has become more direct and transparent. Infrastructure development has accelerated. Renewable energy capacity has expanded dramatically.

Such successes have created an image of a nation capable of accomplishing within a few years what other democracies might take decades to achieve. In a country of more than 1.4 billion people, that capacity for mobilisation is remarkable.

Yet speed often comes at a cost. Policies frequently arrive before institutions, businesses and citizens are fully prepared. Implementation challenges emerge. Rules require clarification. Deadlines are revised. Courts intervene. Governments modify guidelines. Citizens and businesses improvise solutions.

Eventually the disruption fades from public memory, while the achievements remain visible. The policy is judged a success. But this raises an important question: was the success a result of flawless implementation, or was it made possible because society adapted to the disruption?

The Western Contrast
The contrast with many Western democracies is striking.

In countries such as Britain, where institutional processes have evolved over centuries, change is often preceded by prolonged consultation and negotiation. Governments rarely move from policy conception to implementation without navigating an elaborate maze of stakeholder engagement, regulatory reviews, impact assessments, pilot programmes and public consultations.

Entire professions are dedicated to managing change. Concepts such as "change management," "stakeholder engagement," "implementation science" and "transformation strategy" have become integral parts of governance and administration.

This approach can appear frustratingly slow. Healthcare reforms, infrastructure projects and housing policies often take years to progress from proposal to execution. By the time consensus is achieved, political priorities may have shifted and fresh reviews may begin.

However, this slow-moving machinery emerged for a reason. Liberal democracies gradually developed safeguards to protect citizens from arbitrary decisions. Workers acquired rights. Communities gained a voice. Environmental impacts became a legitimate concern. Courts acquired the authority to scrutinise governments. Professional bodies gained influence over policy-making.

The result is a system where change is negotiated before implementation.

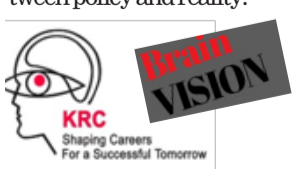
India, by contrast, often negotiates after implementation.

Negotiating Change Before and After
This distinction may explain much about the difference between Indian and Western governance.

In Western democracies, resistance to change is institutionalised. It emerges through unions, professional associations, regulatory agencies, parliamentary committees and judicial processes. Objections are aired before decisions are finalised.

In India, governments often announce decisions first. Negotiations begin later.

State governments adapt policies to local realities. Bureaucracies reinterpret rules. Businesses discover workarounds. Citizens find practical ways to cope. Courts intervene where necessary. Informal arrangements emerge to bridge gaps between policy and reality.



What appears to be decisive implementation may therefore conceal an extensive process of post-announcement negotiation. India does not necessarily face



less resistance to change than Western countries. Rather, resistance takes a different form. Instead of delaying decisions, it reshapes implementation. The E20 debate illustrates this phenomenon. Questions about older vehicles, fuel efficiency, agricultural sustainability and market readiness are being addressed even as the transition proceeds. The discussion is occurring alongside implementation rather than before it.

Society as the Shock Absorber
This raises a deeper issue about governance in India.

When disruptive reforms ultimately succeed, who deserves the credit?

Governments often claim credit for ambitious policymaking and decisive action. Yet society itself frequently plays an equally important role.

During periods of economic disruption, small businesses develop survival strategies. Families support one another through administrative transitions. Young people help older relatives navigate digital systems. Communities create informal solutions where formal institutions struggle.

India possesses a remarkable capacity for adaptation.

This social resilience is one of the country's greatest strengths. It allows India to absorb shocks that might overwhelm less flexible societies.

However, resilience should not be confused with institutional efficiency.

Often, the state initiates change while society bears much of the burden of adjustment. Citizens absorb uncertainty. Businesses shoulder compliance costs. Families compensate for institutional shortcomings.

The country moves forward because society adapts.

This distinction matters because it affects how governance is evaluated. A policy may ultimately succeed, but success does not necessarily mean that implementation was painless or equitable.

The Hidden Costs of Transformation
Rapid transformation also has a social dimension that is frequently overlooked.

Not all citizens possess equal capacity to adapt.

Large corporations can hire consultants to navigate new regulations. Small businesses may struggle with compliance. Educated urban households can embrace digital systems more easily than elderly citizens or those with limited access to technology.

Similarly, wealthier vehicle owners can replace older cars if required. Those who have invested years of savings in a single vehicle cannot do so as easily.

Every ambitious reform carries transitional costs. These costs are often unevenly distributed.

Economic statistics may eventually capture the benefits of a policy. What they rarely measure are the anxieties, inconveniences, lost opportunities and adjustment burdens experienced during the transition.

The success of rapid reform often depends on an invisible subsidy provided by ordinary citizens who absorb these costs.

The Cost of Delay
Yet focusing solely on the costs of disruption would present an incomplete picture.

Western democracies face a different problem: the cost of delay.

When every stakeholder must be consulted and every risk assessed, necessary reforms can become trapped in procedural complexity.

Healthcare systems postpone difficult decisions. Infrastructure projects remain stuck in planning processes. Housing shortages worsen. Productivity stagnates. Public finances deteriorate.

Unlike sudden disruptions, these costs accumulate gradually. They are chronic rather than acute. There are no dramatic headlines, but millions experience the consequences over time.

In this sense, India and the West confront opposite challenges.

India's costs tend to be immediate and visible. The West's costs are often slow-moving and dispersed.

Neither model can claim unquestioned superiority.

One risks excessive intervention. The other risks excessive caution.

Why People Resist Change
Much of modern governance assumes that resistance to change stems from fear, ignorance or attachment to the status quo. Consequently, policymakers focus on communication strategies designed to persuade people to accept reform.

But resistance may have a deeper source. People often do not resist change itself. They

resist being changed by someone else. The distinction is important. Individuals frequently embrace changes that help shape. They become resistant when decisions are imposed without participation or ownership. At its core, the issue concerns agency, dignity and control.

Who gets to decide that change is necessary? Who participates in designing it? Who bears its costs?

India's governance model often prioritises speed over participation. Western systems frequently prioritise participation at the expense of speed.

The challenge lies in finding a balance between the two.

The Importance of Reversibility
Perhaps the most useful question is not whether governments should move quickly or slowly.

A better question is: what happens if they are wrong?

In an era of rapid technological, economic and environmental change, governments must experiment. Policymakers cannot wait indefinitely for perfect information.

However, not all decisions carry equal risks. Rapid action may be appropriate when mistakes can be corrected. Greater caution is warranted when errors could cause irreversible damage.

This principle offers a practical framework for governance:

Move quickly when failure is reversible. Move carefully when failure may have permanent consequences.

Such an approach avoids both reckless disruption and paralysing proceduralism.

The Role of Trust
Ultimately, the ability to balance speed and democracy depends on trust.

Citizens are more willing to accept rapid experimentation when they believe that governments

are acting transparently and responsibly.

- Trust grows when governments:
 - Present evidence openly.
 - Acknowledge uncertainty.
 - Publish reliable data.
 - Admit mistakes.
 - Protect those harmed by policy decisions.
 - Revise policies when evidence changes.
 - Remain willing to reverse course if necessary.

Without trust, societies face two undesirable alternatives: endless consultation because citizens distrust authority, or coercive mobilisation because authority distrusts consultation.

Trust provides the bridge between democratic legitimacy and effective action.

India's Challenge in an Age of Acceleration
The governance debate surrounding E20 arrives at a moment when the pace of history is accelerating.

Artificial intelligence, climate change, demographic change, public health crises, migration pressures, energy transitions and technological disruption demand faster decision-making than ever before.

Western democracies increasingly ask how they can move faster without sacrificing accountability and rights.

India faces the opposite challenge.

How can it preserve its extraordinary capacity for mobilisation without repeatedly asking ordinary citizens to absorb the costs of transformation?

The answer lies neither in permanent disruption nor endless consultation.

Modern societies need institutions capable of continuous adaptation—institutions that are agile enough to respond to change, cautious enough to avoid irreversible harm, transparent enough to build trust and humane enough to protect those most vulnerable during transitions.

More Than a Fuel Debate
Viewed through this lens, the E20 controversy becomes something much larger than a technical discussion about ethanol blends.

The engines may adapt. The economy may benefit. The policy may achieve many of its stated objectives.

But the broader question remains: how should democracies manage transformation in an age of constant change?

India's experience demonstrates the power of speed, ambition and social resilience. Yet it also reveals the risks of relying too heavily on society's ability to absorb disruption. The challenge of modern governance is not simply whether change occurs. Change is inevitable. The challenge is ensuring that progress does not come at the expense of those expected to bear its burdens. Between paralysis and recklessness lies the path every democracy must find. The E20 debate reminds us that the future of governance will be determined not only by how quickly societies can change, but by how fairly and responsibly they manage the human consequences of that change.

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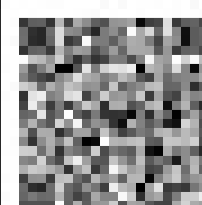


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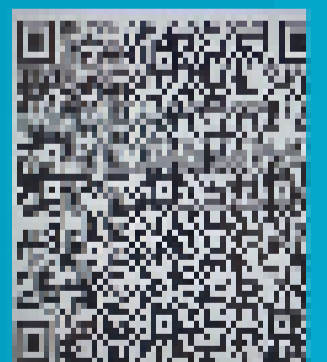
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