

# Asom Barta

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G20 delegates were treated regally during their presence in Assam.



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The Swanirbhar Naari Scheme is making its impact in rural Assam.



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Building a road is building bridges to prosperity. This is the case of Palashbari-Mirza-Chandubi Road.

# Drive against child marriage wins plaudits



## AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

The death of a 16-year-old to-be mother during child delivery at home in Jogighopa of Bongaigaon district is one of the most compelling reasons as to why the Government of Assam initiated a drive against offenders of child marriage in the State. Although, she was rushed to the hospital after her health deteriorated, by then all was over. The subsequent arrest of her husband and father-in-law is of no consequence to the parents of the deceased.

Like her, thousands across the State have lost lives even during institutional deliveries because they are underage and not ready to bear the ramifications that come along with childbirth by underaged women.

On January 23, in a Cabinet decision, a perturbed Assam Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma cited damning figures from the National Family Health Survey (5) released in 2022 to his ministerial colleagues and called for action under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO), 2012 and the Prevention of Child Marriages Act (PCMA), 2006 in the State to stem needless loss of lives and other societal consequences. Since then, (based on information shared by the Chief Minister on Feb 17) 3047 people have been arrested under the two laws by the police, which have registered 4235 cases in the last five weeks, while the total number of offenders have been identified at 6707, while those in judicial custody numbers 2587. The Chief Minister made it abundantly clear in his subsequent interaction with the media that this action will

continue until the Assembly polls in Assam in 2026.

The move has got solid support from major quarters, including NGOs and others organisations working for the welfare of women and children across the State. One among them being Kailash Satyarthi Children Foundation, managed by the Nobel laureate Kailash Satyarthi.

"The action by the State Government is the first ever stringent step by any State Government in the country to protect children by applying laws of the land in both letter and spirit," read a release issued by the Foundation to the media across the country.

Miguel Das of Utsah, an NGO working for children rights in Assam, welcomed the action of the State Government. "Child marriage is a gross violation of the rights of children. We welcome the decisiveness of the Chief Minister in coming down hard on those responsible for this," he told *Asom Barta*, adding that this will sensitise the people on the subject.

Rofiqul Islam of Barpeta has been working on preventing child marriage since 2015. Talking to this reporter, he narrated the challenges that he has been facing since, including an incident that took place in 2016 in Howli of Barpeta district where they managed to convince the families of the to-be bride and groom after relentless persuasion, and great personal risk.

"The families of the bride involved in child marriages are mostly illiterate and economically poor. To rid the society of this, it is important to encourage families to invest in



**"The action by the State Government is the first ever stringent step by any State Government in the country to protect children by applying laws of the land in both letter and spirit"**

**Kailash Satyarthi  
Nobel laureate**

the education of the girl child," he said. "This is what I expect the Government to focus on."

Mridula Sarma, an academic, who recently completed her doctoral thesis on the topic of the health of pregnant women in tea gardens of Sonitpur district, said that she had noticed disturbing trends during her research in these gardens. "During my research, I observed that child marriage was prevalent in these tea gardens with major consequences. I appreciate this move by the Government of Assam. I think improvement in education and medical facilities will go a long way in preventing the incidences of child and maternal mortality," she said.

The Assam Chief Minister, days after the drive began, told the media that there will be enough provision in the State's forthcoming Budget to take care of the issues arising out of the drive, including rehabilitation and subsistence of those pregnant women and young mothers. "We will have a call centre to create awareness among the people. There will be a network of agencies, including intelligence gathering, to root out the system," he said, making it clear that the drive is here to stay.



# Musings of a Chief Minister



Our endeavour to create a favourable atmosphere for young girls in the State has started bearing fruit. Despite opposition from many quarters, we persisted with the idea that provisions under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO), 2012 and the Prevention of Child Marriages Act (PCMA), 2006 need to be better implemented to prevent child marriage in Assam. The data on this provided by the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) would make no one happy. Yet, there was a degree of resistance by many, something that I have failed to fathom.

However, as I write this, I am coming to know from responsible individuals and organisations that several families are cancelling scheduled weddings of their teenage sons and daughters out of respect for the sensitisation that our Government has launched all over the State. More so, we are supplementing the efforts of the police with decisive & strategic interventions by DCs. We are identifying vulnerable pockets, which is then followed by holding of Bal Panchayat to sensitise & make people aware of the ramifications of child marriage.

While we are keen to carry on with these awareness exercise on child marriage as long as it takes, I want to reiterate that we will brook no tolerance if the directives on child marriage is violated. The entire exercise has been planned with the welfare objective in mind, and I urge my fellow citizens not to read it with a political or religious prism.

During my discussion with DCs and SPs of districts, we have zeroed in on the idea of building a robust ecosystem to stop this evil by 2026. I urge the people of the State to support us in the best way they can. Child marriage is a social scourge, and we are committed to ensure that this evil practice is nipped. Period.

The Union Budget presented last month has once again demonstrated the continued support that Prime Minister Sri Narendra Modi and his Government have for Assam and the North East. Going into specifics is not desirable here. Enough to state that the 7 Saptarishi priorities of the Union Budget will usher in rapid growth in the 8 Astha-Lakshmi States of the North East. For me, it is a visionary Union Budget that will accelerate Bharat's journey to become a developed nation. Let us keep in mind that we cannot be parochial on these allocations. So, unless the North East develops, Assam's development alone cannot give us the pride that we want to experience. In the same vein, unless the country develops, the region's development alone will rob us of the sheen that we as citizens of this great country want to have.

Our quest for generating 1 lakh Government jobs has now entered a decisive phase. This was not merely an electoral promise. The promise had an underlying security of financial growth and increased revenue collection which we had foreseen if voted to power. This increase in revenue, that we have been able to generate, has allowed us the leeway to go ahead with our idea. I am very hopeful that come May, we will be able to announce thousands of vacancies in the Government for talents required to serve the State in various capacities. I believe that once the intent is there, one can achieve what one has set out to do.

Come April 14, Assam will have a unique record of 11,140 Bihu dancers grooving to *tal* and *dhol* at one venue. The idea is to welcome the Prime Minister who, I feel, deserves such a rousing welcome for doing what he has for the North East of India, especially Assam. This mega programme will not only catapult Assam onto the global stage, if at all it is still required, but also give a special flight to one of our favourite dance forms.

During February, Hollywood acting icon Leonardo Di Caprio took note of our special drive in rhino conservation and efforts to save them from the menace of poaching by posting on social media that it was an example worth noticing. He may not know but I want to impress on the fact that preserving wildlife is our second nature. It is integral to our cultural identity. My Government will take this as yet another achievement and rededicate itself to persevering and safeguarding our rich cultural heritage. On behalf of the people of Assam, I have taken the opportunity of inviting him to see in person what we have done for our beloved unicorn.

We are not only succeeding on nature and cultural fronts but also agriculture. We recently crossed the mark of 2 lakh MT paddy procurement at MSP. The initiative has seen some 22,843 farmers joining us in the process across 195 procurement centres in the State. At this pace, I am hopeful that we will reach the 10 Lakh MT target by September 30, 2023. This is a solid boost to our efforts towards doubling farmers' income, something that we have been working towards so sincerely.

**Himanta Biswa Sarma**  
Chief Minister, Assam

**While we are keen to carry on with these awareness exercise on child marriage as long as it takes, I want to reiterate that we will brook no tolerance if the directives on child marriage is violated.**



# PM keen to visit Krishna Guru Ashram



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing the Krishna Guru Eknaam Akhanda Kirtan meeting.

## AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has expressed his desire to visit the Krishna Guru Sevashram in Barpeta in the coming future to seek the blessings of the saint who is revered across the country.

He was addressing the Krishna Guru Eknaam Akhanda Kirtan for World Peace held at Krishnaguru Sevashram in Na Satra village in Barpeta via video conferencing last month.

Krishnaguru Eknaam Akhanda Kirtan for World Peace was a month-long kirtan which began on January 6.

Addressing the gathering, the Prime Minister said that the traditions of knowledge, service and humanity in ancient India which were propagated by Krishna Guru are in perpetual motion even today. He observed that the divinity of the contributions of the saint and the efforts of his disciples were clearly visible on the occasion.

Referring to the tradition of *Akhand Eknaam Jap* every twelve years by Krishnaguru, PM Modi noted the Indian tradition of organising spiritual events with duty as the key thought. "These events rekindle a sense of duty in the individual and society. People in the past used to gather to discuss and analyse the happenings of the last twelve years, evaluate the present and create a blueprint for the future," he said.

"*Eknaam Akhanda Kirtan* is laying down a similarly powerful tradition and making the world familiar with the heritage and spiritual consciousness of the North East," he commented.

PM Modi said that the nation has worked towards the betterment of its people with the same spirit of taking everyone along (Sabka



**Paramguru Krishnaguru Ishwar established the Krishnaguru Sevashram in 1974.**

Saath) for everyone's development (Sabka Vikas) with absolute dedication.

Giving examples of Assam and the North East, the Prime Minister observed that this region had been neglected for decades when it came to development and connectivity, but it now being given top priority.

Referring to this year's Budget, the Prime Minister underlined the same priority to the deprived as the key guiding sentiment. Noting the key role of tourism in the economy of North East, he mentioned this year's Budget provision of developing and upgrading 50 tourist destinations which will benefit the region a great deal. The Prime Minister also talked about the *Ganga Vilas Cruise* (it reached Assam on Feb 18.) He highlighted that Indian heritage's most valuable treasures are situated on the riverbanks.

The Prime Minister also mentioned Krishnaguru Sevashram's work for artisans in traditional skills and commented that the country has done unprecedented work in developing the traditional skills and linking the artisans with the global markets in the last few years. He also spoke about changes in laws around bamboo, from tree to grass, which have opened avenues in bamboo business.

PM Modi said that 'Unity Malls', proposed in the Budget, will help farmers, artisans, and youth of Assam by showcasing their products. These products will be showcased in the Unity Malls in other States and tourist spots.

He talked about his fondness for Gamosa and said that it encapsulates the hard work and skills of the women of Assam. PM Modi said that the Budget has made special provisions for these self-help groups. "In order to make the income of women a means of their empowerment, 'Mahila Samman Saving Certificate' scheme has also been started. Women will especially get the benefit of higher interest on savings," he said.

"There are many such provisions in this Budget, from which women of North Eastern States like Assam, Nagaland, Tripura, Meghalaya will be widely benefited and new opportunities will be created for them," he added while mentioning specifically the increased allocation under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana.

He asked the Sevashram to work to spread awareness about Prime Minister Vishwakarma Kaushal Yojana meant to benefit traditional artisans, while also asking it to popularise coarse grains, recently branded as Shri Anna.



# Bowled over: Hospitality wins hearts, soul



Y20 delegates with their G20 kits and traditional japis in Guwahati. A view of a Y20 meeting (bottom)

**AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI**

Assam and Guwahati in general was able to charm the G20 and Y20 delegates who converged here in the month of February for key meetings as part of the agenda set by India's presidency of G20 this year. While the visit to Kaziranga National Park, the sylvan surroundings of tea gardens as well as village life, the banks of Brahmaputra all contributed to some serious discussions from sustainable finance to peace building to entrepreneurship and more importantly sustainability, these delegates were also bowled over by the State and its people, its food and its hospitality. While the net outcome of all this will take its time to unravel, a very important beginning was made.

"I think the world needs to learn one thing from Assam—we need to learn hospitality. The hospitality received here by us... It's unbelievable. We can't put it into words, it's spectacular. I really love how you helped us learn about everyone's tradition and culture, especially the tribes of Assam and the wonderful wildlife and biodiversity, food, and culture. We enjoyed everything," said Sripada Indrakanti from the US.

So was the case with Satami, the Japanese delegate. "I came for the first time to Assam and I was surprised. It is very beautiful. You are warm-hearted and welcoming people. We really enjoyed it," she said.

The idea was not hospitality alone but also substance.

Y20 chair Anmol Sovit told *Asom Barta* that a very good beginning has been made. "Network is Networth. We have now networked with future leaders from the G20 countries who are likely to be here during the course of various meetings. In Guwahati, more than 20 Y20 leaders from G20 nations were present besides over 100 Indian delegates. This will have its own impact," he said.

Similar were the views of Michael Sianipar of Indonesia, the former chair of Y20. "I am feeling very inspired after spending three days in Assam. I see a lot of enthusiasm and a lot of excitement among the youths and I can see how the youth of India would shape the discourse of the global future. G20 is the premier forum of global leadership and India being the chair of G20 this year is a huge platform. A White Paper on the five themes of Y20 was launched

- Future of Work: Industry 4.0, Innovation and 21st century
- Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction: Making Sustainability as a Way of Life
- Peace Building and Reconciliation: Ushering in an Era of No War
- Shared Future: Youth in Democracy and Governance
- Health, Wellbeing & Sports: Agenda for Youth



by Anurag Thakur, Union Minister for Youth Affairs and Sports. Dr. Ranoj Pegu, Minister of Education, Government of Assam presented the Research Papers on the five themes. (Please See Box)

Talking about these themes, the Minister said that these themes have been carefully chosen to be deliberated upon for a shared future of the global community. These five themes present an extraordinary opportunity for the youth to create, contribute and collaborate to the development agenda of G20, he said.

"Y20 India Summit this year would exemplify youth-centric efforts and showcase progressive policy measures ideated by the youth and for the youth across the globe," Thakur told the gathering.

The Minister applauded the effort of the Government of Assam for organising the Y20 awareness drives across the State.

In the run-up to the event, 10,000 youth in 36 colleges of Assam participated in seminars, debate, workshops, and quiz competitions on Y20, besides over 10 lakh students from nearly 4,000 schools.



# Ganga Vilas docks on Assam's shore



AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

**MV** *Ganga Vilas*, the iconic cruise ship, docked at Dibrugarh on February 28 after travelling 50 days through various rivers of the country, with 28 Swiss tourists on board. They were received at Bogibeel Railways Tourism Terminal by Union Minister of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways Sarbananda Sonowal. Also present were Shripad Yeso Naik, the Minister of State of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, and Tourism; Dr Rajkumar Ranjan Singh, Minister of State for Education and External Affairs; Shantanu Thakur, Minister of State for Ports, Shipping and Waterways; Rameshwar Teli, Minister of State for Labour, Employment, Petroleum, and Natural Gas; besides Jayanta Mallabaruah, Minister, Tourism, Government of Assam, among others.

The cruise has been billed as the the world's longest river cruise. For the record, the ship was flagged off by Prime Minister Narendra Modi from Varanasi on January 13.

It reached Dhubri in the State on February 17 and since then passengers on board have



been mesmerised by Assam, its culture and the hospitality received by them all through.

These tourists were given a rousing welcome by the Dhubri Deputy Commissioner and Regional Director and officials of the Inland Waterways Authorities of India (IWAI) as well as officials of the Assam Tourism. They spent considerable time in stalls, especially of clay, jute and terracotta, displayed by the self-

help groups of the district. A Koch-Rajbongshi dance was also performed to welcome these tourists.

After a few hours of local tour, they were taken to the Asarikandi area of the district which is known for its terracotta handicraft. The day was also marked by their visit to historical sites of the district, especially the Gurudwara dedicated to Guru Tegh Bahadur. The Cruise departed for Goalpara on February 18 wherein they visited the historic Surya Pahar, an archaeological site.

On February 20, it touched the shores of Sualkuchi which they toured on board several e-rickshaws. They were regaled by the traditional boat race in Sualkuchi, and traditional songs related to the boat race. On the same day, they were received at the Pandu Port by district officials and those representing the Tourism Department. These Swiss guests were also treated to Karbi and Tiwa folk dances. Kamakhya Temple, Assam State Museum, and Mayong, the nerve centre of Tantric practices, were places of importance they visited before boarding on to their onward journey to Tezpur, Biswanath, Kaziranga, Sivasagar, Lakhimpur and Majuli.

## 3.8 lakh houses allotted under PMAYG



Department minister Ranjeet Dass handing over certificate to a beneficiary during the programme.

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

**C**handika Garo of Sonapur had always dreamt of a pucca house. She had lived with this dream for well over four decades. However, on February 16, that dream took a giant leap when she was allotted

the first instalment under Pradhan Mantri Gramin Awas Yojana (PMAYG) along with 3.8 lakh other beneficiaries of the State like her.

The programme held at the Srimanta Sankardev Kalakshetra under the aegis of the Panchayat and Rural Development (P&RD) Department was inaugurated by the Department Minister Ranjeet Kumar Dass on behalf of Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma.

Adhir Chandra Das of Moirabari, who works for a petrol pump station there, was another beneficiary under the scheme. “A pucca house will be a relief for my family. My house at present is in a dilapidated state. It needs constant repair as it is a kutchha house,” he told *Asom Barta*.

Dr. Sarma, in his written note, read out by the Minister, said that his Government was on track to achieve the target set under PMAY (G) allotment. The P&RD Minister appreciated the Prime Minister’s vision in ensuring houses for all under the scheme by 2024. He exhorted beneficiaries to utilise the fund allotted to them in the rightful manner. “We have been able to achieve the construction of 3.61 lakh houses under the scheme in the the last 20 months since the Government under Dr. Sarma took charge in Dispur,” he said in his speech.

Funds under the scheme have been allotted to construct 10 lakh houses in this financial year. A handbook depicting ways to construct pucca houses under the scheme was also given to beneficiaries in the programme.

The beneficiary will also avail 95 days of wages under the MGNREGA Scheme during the construction of their houses. Besides the ₹ 1.30 lakh allotted under the PMAY (G), they will boost their income by another ₹ 21,000 under the MGNREGA scheme.

Representatives of many gaon panchayats also took part in the programme through the virtual mode.



# Thumbs up to Budget in Assam, North East

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Assam and the North East have a lot to cheer about in the Union Budget 2023-2024 presented in Parliament last month. The Assam Government was quick to acknowledge the largesse of the Finance Minister which it said was the largest ever allocation of development funds in its history.

Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma expected the Budget to serve as a catalyst in job creation, with initiatives such as PM Vikas, the National Apprentice Programme, PM Kaushal Vikas Yojna 4.0 and significant investments in digital and green economies.

He emphasised that these measures will not only provide new job opportunities, but also help to promote innovation and sustainability in the region.

"I am grateful to the Union Finance Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman, for granting further fiscal autonomy to the States in incentivising capital investments," Sarma stated.

He expressed his gratitude towards the Prime Minister for nearly doubling the allocation for Prime Minister's Development Initiative for North East Region (PM-DevINE), aimed at revitalizing infrastructure growth in North Eastern States, and praised the Budget's focus on tribal and indigenous communities through schemes like PM-PVTG for last-mile development.

The Budget also received a thumbs up from industry bodies, and the masses. "With major capital expenditure outlays and an outlook for employment generation, the Budget is a welcome one with a progressive outlook, balancing economic, social, and ecological stability and development of the country and region," said the CII NE Council.

"I welcome the announcement on the MSME sector. The Government should take advantage to push for the growth of MSMEs in the State," said Monaj Bhuyan, secretary of Asom Samabai Kohar Sangha, Sarthebari.

Abhijit Barooah, Managing Director, Premier Cryogenics Limited, welcomed the announcement of setting up of 157 nursing colleges in co-locations with 157 medical colleges launched since 2014. "It will enable India to reap demographic dividend. Indian nurses, especially from North East, are in demand across the world and the region will benefit with identification of few such colleges in the region," he said.

Echoing the industrialist's sentiment was Dr Hemeswari Bhuyan, Principal (in-charge), Regional Nursing College, Guwahati. "A proper healthcare system is dependent on both doctors and nurses. I expect that the Assam Government would want a few of these to be established in the State in the coming days," she told this reporter citing figures to point out to the huge demand for nursing education in the State.

Niranta Gohain, Director of Wave Eco Tourism, appreciated the outlay of ₹ 1412 cr in the Budget under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme. "The Swadesh Darshan Scheme will benefit the North East if executed in letter and spirit," he said.

## Highlights

- ₹ 87,160 cr – estimate share of devolution to the NE States. Assam's share pegged at ₹ 31,950 cr.
- ₹ 5,892 cr – 114% hike in allocation to DoNER.
- ₹ 2,491 cr for North East Special Infrastructure Development Scheme
- ₹ 2,200 cr – 450 % hike in allocation for (PM – DevNE)
- ₹ 47, 018 cr grant for Rural Local Bodies for all States – NER to benefit from this enhanced allocation.
- 61% hike in grant for Urban Local Bodies for all States .
- ₹ 15,000 cr Pradhan Mantri PVTG Development Mission – to improve socio – economic condition of particularly vulnerable tribal groups
- Enhanced allocation for JJM and other key Central schemes.
- 33% hike in capital expenditure to ₹ 10 lakh cr – will transform infrastructure in Assam and other NE States.
- ₹ 10,000 cr Urban Infra Fund to help create world class infrastructure – many cities in NER to benefit.
- Announcement of new airports and heliports to boost connectivity in the NER
- ₹ 5,000 cr for developing roads in border districts.
- PM VIKAS- Pradhan Mantri Vishwakarma Kaushal Samman Yojana to help capacity building for traditional craftsmen like those making Gamocha, Xorai
- ₹ 2 lakh crore additional guaranteed credit for MSMEs
- Unity Mall to showcase one district one product from Assam and other States
- Pharma industries in NER to benefit from new policy on medical research
- ₹ 19,700 cr for Green Hydrogen Mission, will boost production of green fuel in oil refineries
- PMKVY 4.0 – An avenue for youth from North East to gain skill required in the digital and new age economy
- National Apprentice Scheme – Direct benefit transfer of stipends to over 47 lakh youths; Lakhs youths from NER to benefit
- ₹ 94,679 cr – Union Government's expenditure in the North East for 2023 –24

## Post-Budget, Railways to chug faster

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

The Union Budget has earmarked ₹ 10,988.80 crore for the development of railways in the North East, Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said in his virtual interaction with media persons of the region. Vaishnaw said for the first time an amount of ₹ 1.20 lakh crore has been earmarked for connecting the hilly and border areas of the region.

"The gross budget allocation for NF Railway for 2023-24 fiscal is ₹ 10,988.80 crore," he said. "It is 13.75 per cent more than the previous year's allotment (₹ 9,660.14 crore)

Also 59 stations in the North East will be developed with world-class amenities cum facilities. Last year, 445 km of railway tracks were electrified in Assam. Fifteen stations each in all divisions of NFR will be developed under Amrit Bharat Station Scheme.

He added that adequate funds have been allotted for the overall development of railway infrastructure in all North Eastern States. Vaishnaw informed the media that work on infrastructure projects worth ₹ 75,795 cr is in progress in the region.

₹ 600 crore for New Bongaigaon – Rangiya-Kamakhya and ₹ 500 crore for New Bongaigaon-Goalpara-Kamakhya have been allocated for speedy execution of the ongoing track doubling works, he said. He said that Agthori Station near Guwahati will be redeveloped with world-class facilities with a total spending of ₹ 517 crore.





# Weaving a quiet revolution

AB BUREAU, SUALKUCHI/BAKSA/  
NALBARI

A silent revolution is weaving in rural Assam. Some 35 km west of Assam capital city of Guwahati is Sualkuchi in Kamrup district. It is on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra River. A silk town, it is also known as 'Manchester of Assam'. The greater Sualkuchi area is famous for its centuries-old heritage of weaving.

Weaving is not just a tradition handed down by generations, but a way of life and a labour of love in Assam. Most of the families of Sualkuchi have hand-operated looms, which they call taatxaal. The handwoven Muga and Pat silk cloth in traditional looms in Sulakuchi is known for its high quality.

Dipa Kakati (45), a resident of Sonari Para in Sualkuchi village, has been enthusiastically weaving silk gamochas for well over three months now. She is keen to deposit as many of them at a procurement centre set up by Directorate of Handloom and Textile at her native village under the Swanirbhar Nari Scheme of the Government of Assam.

This Scheme is an endeavour by the Government to empower indigenous weavers of the State, and to provide financial support to the weavers' families. It is being implemented through the Directorate of Handloom & Textiles, Assam. The Department has set up procurement centres under the scheme.

"The Department has procured 40 such gamochas from me. I meet the benchmark set by the Department. They deposited money in my bank account three days after the procurement. I got ₹ 53,000. The standard price of these Gamochas has been fixed at ₹ 1,325 per piece," says Dipa.

Under the Scheme, traditional handwoven items are to be procured directly from the indigenous weavers without involving any middlemen.

Nilima Devi (34) of Mati Parbat area under Greater Sualkuchi is another happy weaver. She sold 100 gamochas. "I have reached the upper limit of supplying 100 Gamochas under the scheme. I got ₹ 1,32,500 within three days of selling my product," she tells *Asom Barta*. "Previously, we used to get ₹ 1,000 from the middlemen who would buy from us. Now, no one is selling them." Nilima is now keen to invest the money in expanding her handloom business.

## Fact Box

- Registration at [swanibharnaari.assam.gov.in](http://swanibharnaari.assam.gov.in) portal was open for a period of 45 days, from 19<sup>th</sup> July 2022 to 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2022.
- A total of **5,08,351** applications were received.
- Total approved applicants : **4,80,080**.



**"I have reached the upper limit of supplying 100 Gamochas under the scheme. I got ₹ 1,32,500 within three days of selling my product"**

**Nilima Devi**

The centre in Sualkuchi is one of the five procurement centres set up by the Department in Kamrup district, which has the distinction of having the highest number of weavers in a district in the State.

"In our procurement centre, we have registered 4,886 weavers under Swanirbhar Naari scheme. We have purchased 2,627 handloom products under the schemes from these centres," says Pinky Baishya, an inspector in the Department.

The scenario in Salbari in Baksa in the Bodoland Territorial Region is rosy as well.

Jelina Goyari (36) and Angima Basumatary (43) are residents of Kahibari village adjacent to the Manas National Park in Baksa district. They have travelled 17 km to the Salbari-based office of the Department to deposit their products.

Like them, over hundred other weavers of the district have deposited their handwoven Tiyoni Gamochas. Tiyoni is one of the eight varieties of Gamochas, which has recently got the prestigious GI status. "Till today (February 19), the Department has procured 38 Tiyoni Gamocha from me. I got ₹ 9,690 by selling them. This scheme leaves us with more money in hand," says Angima.

Echoing similar feelings, Jelina informs us that weavers in her village are keen to register their names in the Swanirbhar Naari portal to sell their handloom-woven products.

"I deposited 40 Tiyoni Gamochas at the procurement centre. They are currently verifying whether my products fulfil the desired standards," she informs this reporter.

Weavers from various communities registered under Swanirbhar Naari scheme in Baksa district are currently making a beeline to the Salbari Procurement Centre to deposit their products, mostly Gamochas. Tarali Talukdar (46) from Hatikhola Ananda Bazar village being one among them. She says that the amount she has received would be spent on her son and daughter's education.

In Baksa district, 9,352 weavers have registered for the scheme.

In Nalbari, the number of registered beneficiaries stands at 29,854. Brajeswar Sarma, Circle Inspector of the procurement centre in Nalbari town, informs this newsletter that 32,318 weavers had applied for registration but some of them failed to fulfil norms. The district has five procurement centres at Tihu, Chamata, Baharghat, Nalbari and Barkhetri.

"The enthusiasm is unbelievable. This is the first year. The time on our hands is limited. I can tell you with certainty that next year, there will be more registration," he says.





# Enhancing digital skills



Students’ awareness programme on Awareness on Cyber Security & Emerging technologies conducted for the students of Tihu College, Nalbari, Assam.

**AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI**

Ananta Ramchiary, the director of Baganpara, Dhamdhama, Baksa Farmers Producers’ Organisations is one of the beneficiaries of the programme on Information Technology conducted by the National Institute of Electronics & Information Technology (Nielit), a Government of India organisation under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology. He is of the view that use of technology to advance farming accords a lot of benefit to users. Using mobile phones for beneficial use in farming was one of the subjects where hundreds of farmers of the three areas mentioned above took part in the programme conducted by this organisation.

“I took part in a training programme by Nielit which taught us about the use of various apps in mobile phones in seeking suggestions on agriculture, Government schemes, and use of helpline numbers. We were also trained about digital payment. It was a very informative one,” said Ananta.

Beginning February 2022 to March 2024, Nielit has trained 1.65 people in the North East to enhance their digital skills. These are pro bono initiatives divided into four categories for youths, students, farmers, women, and senior citizens. (Please See Box)

A senior officer of Nielit Dr Saurabh Mahanta told *Asom Barta* that the idea of the training being imparted to various sections of the society is to enhance their digital literacy and skills. “Some courses like BlockChain, C++, mobile technology, etc., are increasingly becoming popular. We need to be in sync with these technologies. To achieve these objectives, we have signed MoUs with more than 20 educational institutions, including Kaziranga University, JB College, CIT, Kokrajhar, BHB College, Cinnamarra College. We are in the process of signing similar MoUs with 30 other institutions,” he said.

He informed this reporter that two of their trainees Ujjwal Ray and Panchannan Nath have secured employment in CIT, Kokrajhar after being trained in BlockChain technology. Satyanan Nandi and Ayush Kumar have joined Sutherland Global while Jyotishman Das has joined APT Software. “Once we begin our professional courses, these numbers will rise. We are encouraged by our initial success. We will expand our mandate to incubate digital and electronic start-ups soon,” Mahanta said.

“Our students are reaping the benefit of the programme conducted by Nielit in our institute. Be it in the case of their employment or general usage, these courses are of immense help,” said Assistant Professor of CIT Kokrajhar Vikram Choudhury.

Phanidhar Mech of the Department of History in BHB College told *Asom Barta* that courses conducted by Nielit have created awareness among students and guardians alike on digital technologies. “Of late, a course on solar power is being planned. Our college has already been provided with materials related to the course. We are sure that these will create a human resource base required by the country to meet growing demand for solar power,” he said.

“I took part in a training programme by Nielit which taught us about the use of various apps in mobile phones in seeking suggestions on agriculture, Government schemes, and use of helpline numbers. We were also trained about digital payment. It was a very informative one”

- Ananta



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|---|---|
| <p><b>Category- 1</b><br/>Digital Inclusion for Digital Equity</p> <p><b>Target:</b> Farmers, women, elderly &amp; school students</p> <p><b>Courses:</b> Use of ICT Technologies for effective farming and marketing, and Basics of Graphics Designer,Basics of Electrification and Solar Power Technologies. etc.</p> | <p><b>Category- 2</b><br/>Capacity Building in Digital Skill Set for IECT</p> <p><b>Target:</b> Graduates and Undergraduates</p> <p><b>Courses:</b> Cyber Security , Blockchain, Social Media Marketing &amp; Advertisement, Machine Learning, Solar Power Installation Operation and Maintenance, etc.</p>   |
| <p><b>Category- 3</b><br/>Capacity Building in Current Industry Demanding Technologies</p> <p><b>Target:</b> Technical graduates</p> <p><b>Courses:</b> Programming Technologies , Web or Mobile Technologies, Database Technologies, Software Testing/ QA/ Management</p>  | <p><b>Category- 4</b><br/>Capacity Building of School Teachers on IECT Technologies</p> <p><b>Target:</b> Teachers</p> <p><b>Courses:</b> Capacity Building of School Teachers on IECT Technologies, Upskilling NIELIT staffs in Emerging technologies (Industry oriented) along with an industrial visit</p> |



# Asom Mala : A lot to cheer about



**AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI/PALASHBARI/MIRZA**

The journey from Palashbari via Mirza to Chandubi is an experience thanks not only to the greens abutting a major stretch of the journey but also the highway that is today a talk of the town, literally. Developed and completed well before its deadline of two years, the road today presents an example of quality construction matching the best in the country. Built at an eye-popping ₹ 222 crore, this 27.97 km stretch was conceived and executed under the Asom Mala project of the Public Works Roads Department.

Asom Mala is a long-term perspective of the Department for fuelling economic growth as well as improving road infrastructure towards Sustainable Development Goals and achieving the Assam Vision 2030.

Anil Kalita (58) a native of Palasbari is among those who cannot stop gushing about the road and the Department. “We have been witnessing positive changes after the construction of this road. You see the mighty Brahmaputra flowing just a few metres away on the northern side of this road. Hudumpur is now a popular selfie point and fast becoming a picnic spot. Land prices have multiplied while investment in the area has gone up. We

“Under Asom Mala scheme, we have taken up numbers of roads constructions in key areas of the State with a vision not only to improve roads communication system but for overall economic development”

Diganta Goswami, Executive Engineer of State PWD-cum-Nodal officer of Asom Mala project

expect more development in these greater areas,” he told *Asom Barta*.

Kabindra Chandra Kalita manages a pharmacy at Mirza Chock. He is of the view that the development he has seen of the area is unprecedented. “Mirza Chowk is fast becoming an urban area. Never in the last 20-years have I seen commercial activities in the area as I see now after the construction of this road,” he told this reporter.

The idea that better roads & infrastructure will lead to economic development is what is the driving force for the Department.

“Under Asom Mala scheme, we have taken up numbers of roads constructions in key areas of the State with a vision not only to improve roads communication system but for

overall economic development,” said Diganta Goswami, Executive Engineer of State PWD-cum-Nodal officer of Asom Mala project.

The Asom Mala programme was always meant to achieve these objectives when conceived. This is not only an ambitious and huge long-term road infrastructure development programme of the State Government but it is also meant to include several Externally Aided Projects (EAP) under its ambit. Some of the projects under it are worth mentioning like the Asian Development Bank (ADB)-aided Assam Road Network Improvement Project (ARNIP), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)-aided Assam Secondary Road Network Improvement Project (ASRIP), etc. All these are leading to not only faster road communication, a better living standard but also a new-found confidence in the ability of the Government to deliver.

Haren Chandra Nath, the Head Master of Loharghat Government MV School is a happy man these days.

“We have a very good road now. This road leading to Sandubi, a popular tourist destination, will lead to development. The chaos of the recent past is history now. We see investors searching for land here. Many academic institutions are considering their new set-up in our area. I am sure this will be the case in other parts of the State as well,” Nath told this newsletter.

Villages such as Deopani where the Rabhas are in majority are a hub of betel nut, ginger, and brooms. Locals are reporting better sales and more disposable income. The road has helped the likes of Kamal Rava (40) send many truck loads of sand from the greater Deopani and Loharghat area, something that was inconceivable a few months earlier. thanks to the road, while also almost doubling the income of dhaba owner Robin.

Kartik Biswas, Executive Engineer of State PWD, South Kamrup Territorial Road (Palasbari- Mirza) Division said that the entire stretch was built with utmost care, and he is happy that the locals have benefited from the vision of Asom Mala.

- Length of National Highways (NH): 3,909 km
- Length of State Highways (SH) & Major District Roads (MDR): 7,547 km
- Length of Rural Roads: 36,544 km

Most of the roads maintained and managed by the Public Works Roads Department (PWRD),

Road network of Assam caters to other six NE States of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and provides regional interconnectivity to Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Myanmar.





# Assam's Bihu shot at *Guinness*



*Bihu practice session in progress at Srimanta Sankardev Kalakshetra in Guwahati.*

## AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma has said that 11,140 Bihu dancers and dhulias will attempt a shot at the *Guinness Book of World Records*, for the largest ever Bihu dance performance at a single venue, on April 14 at the Sarusajai Stadium in Guwahati. The idea, he said, is to popularise Bihu and take it to the world stage. He said this while addressing the media on February 28.

"The performance will feature 11,140 dancers and dhulias performing

the traditional folk dance of Assam, in a single frame, with the goal of registering the achievement in the *Guinness Book of World Records*," Dr. Sarma said while informing the media that training for the event started on February 27 at Srimanta Sankardev Kalakshetra in Guwahati.

The event is expected to draw national and international attention, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi scheduled to attend it. Sarma said that all Chief Ministers and Governors, as well as envoys of G20 and South East Asian countries would be invited to it. Additionally, the day's festivities would include the inauguration of the Guwahati AIIMS, as well as foundation stone laying ceremony of the ₹ 4,000 Crore Palasbari and Sualkuchi bridge over Brahmaputra River.

He said that a video of the performance would be submitted to Guinness World Records. Master trainers would provide instruction to Bihu dancers from across the State.

Of the 11,140 participants, 70% will be female. Dancers aged between 15 and 35 years have been invited to register on a dedicated portal to facilitate individual recognition by Guinness World Records.

"An expert committee has selected 400 master trainers to train Bihu dancers at the district level. These trainers will travel across Assam for the purpose. Full dress rehearsals will be held from April 9-12," the Assam Chief Minister said.

Participants will receive transportation and costume allowances, with the Government providing ₹ 300 for transportation each day of training and rehearsal and ₹ 3,000 for costumes.

The Chief Minister also announced that beginning next year, a seven-day Bihu festival would be held annually in Sarusajai Stadium, featuring traditional Assamese culture and performances. "Our focus this year is to popularize Bihu through advertisements and attract tourists," he said.

## Yunus opens BTR Knowledge Fest



*Glimpses of the Lai Khutaa ceremony of the 1st Bodoland International Knowledge Festival in Bodoland University.*

## AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Nobel laureate Md. Yunus has asked the State Government to gear its educational policy towards creating entrepreneurs. He was speaking as the chief guest and keynote speaker at the first Bodoland International Knowledge Festival.

"Our education system is wrong. It gives emphasis on job seekers. My opinion is

that Government should lay emphasis on creation of new entrepreneurs. We should give emphasis on spawning job creators...

Yunus also cited the success of Grameen Bank in his speech.

The four-day event will witness the participation of more than 300 invited delegates from across India and 35 international delegates from 14 countries. The festival is a bid

to establish Kokrajhar globally as a destination of knowledge sharing and peace.

More than 10,000 participants will be taking part in the Knowledge Festival comprising students, academicians, researchers, development practitioners, government officials, politicians, entrepreneurs, farmers and SHG members among others.

"This will be one of the biggest events being conducted in the BTR. We want to establish Kokrajhar and the BTR as destinations for education, knowledge sharing and tourism with this mega event," BTR chief Pramod Boro told the media in Guwahati on February 23.

"Over the years Kokrajhar and the BTR were portrayed in the negative. We were known for insurgency and backwardness. But time has changed, and we have moved ahead. Now we want Kokrajhar and the BTR to be known as a destination for intelligent people, not insurgency," he said.

The thematic area of the Bodoland International Knowledge Festival is the achievement of social development priorities and key Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030 in contemporary BTR and the world.

The themes and sub-themes that will be deliberated and discussed in the Festival are: Science & Technology, Livelihood, Indigenous Knowledge System, Women Empowerment, Child Rights & Protection, Peace Building, Good Governance, Communication and Media, Behavioural Change & Communication, Human Rights, Sustainable Agriculture, Climate Justice and Action, Quality Education, Health and Wellbeing, Art & Culture, Youth Entrepreneurship, Intellectual Property Rights, Trade, Commerce and Investment and BTR in the light of the Act East Policy.



# When sign speaks thousand words



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the Indian contingent which participated in Deaflympics in Brazil.

## AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Anupam Gohain, Madhurya Borgohain, Abhinandan Goswami and Bithika Goswami are talents their colleges can be proud of. Students of the Guwahati-based North East College for Hearing Impaired, they have excelled at the global stage to prove to the Doubting Thomases that 'disability' is all about being specially abled. Focus, determination, and concentration in life are great levellers.

Anupam and Madhurya shone with their performances in a cricket league in Europe by securing India a third place. Abhinandan, a black belt, had represented India in Taekwondo in the Deaf Olympics held in Brazil after winning the gold medal in the qualifiers in Lucknow to get into the Indian team. He has to his credit the distinction of being the only hearing-impaired taekwondo player of the region.

Their college mate, Bithika Goswami, is a fifth semester student. She proved her mettle in solo acting, drama and dance at the all-India level while being a very good painter.

These are just a few names who have held aloft the college flag flying. But the list does not stop at these names alone. In 2016, Angela Lahoan won the Miss Deaf India 2016. She is now working in the same institution as a computer operator.



The College was established in 2009 under the aegis and effort of the Assam Association for the Deaf (AAD). More than 100 students are pursuing various courses here. There are six teachers and three interpreters. Besides, guest faculty from Gauhati University also take classes in this institution.

Bandita Dutta, a teacher in the Department of English of the college, says "Since sign language is like the mother tongue for these students who are hearing impaired, they are well within their rights to initiate any conversation in the sign language. It is important for all sections of the society to have some degree of understanding of sign language." She, however, laments that there is an absence of an institutional mechanism in Assam where people can learn sign language. "Those who are keen on learning this have to go out of the State and learn. We have appealed to the Government through our College and the AAD on this."

Secretary AAD and president of the All India Federation of the Deaf, Tapan Sarma, says that the College came up because of the unrelenting efforts of the Association. "There is an infrastructure issue, especially limited availability of land for the College. Yes, they have done extremely well in sports, and art

and culture, but we owe more to them than basic facilities," he confides to this reporter. (His intent and words were interpreted by Ankur Sarma for *Asom Barta*)

Alma mater of this institution have also managed to secure government jobs. "We want the Government to be vigilant on this. There are times when the undeserving ones scrape through and secure a job which is not meant for them," Ankur laments.

"There are times when miscommunication happens when a hearing-impaired individual attempts to speak to any person. This is because not many people in society appreciate the importance of sign language. This also leads to many individuals demeaning the hearing impaired."

He says that this was precisely the reason why they keep on organising sensitisation programmes from time to time. One of them being the week-long All India Conference of the Deaf which will be organised from May 15, 2023 in Assam.

Even the Samagra Siksha Abhiyan in Assam have been organising International Sign Language Day on September 23 each year since 2019 to create awareness. A Facebook Page "Nishabd" is the latest attempt by SSA to encourage people to learn Sign Language.





# On the drive

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

The Transport Department is eyeing a record revenue of ₹ 1,500 crore in the fiscal ending March 31, 2023. Going by the data generated by *Asom Barta*, the Department has managed to collect ₹ 1045.31 crore on the back of a number of measures. The Department is eyeing a revenue of over ₹ 450 crore in the next two months to reach the mark.

Talking to *Asom Barta*, Commissioner Transport, Government of Assam, Adil Khan said that the result is because of the transparency brought by use of technology. "The system is now 100% digital and because of online transactions we have managed to stop leakages. These contactless services have also brought an ease of access," he said.

The districts that have stood out for the Department are Dima Hasao, Kamrup (Metropolitan), Dibrugarh and Nagaon (See Box).

As against a revenue collection of ₹ 214 crore for the financial year ending March 31, 2022, this year the Department has managed to mop up ₹ 286 crore by January 31. "We have raised awareness regarding vehicle tax and the results are there as well. We have been relentless in our campaign against



those who are avoiding paying their vehicle tax," said Gautam Das, District Transport Officer (Registration and License), Kamrup Metropolitan.

He said that the Department will now up the ante on vehicles, commercial as well as personal, registered outside the State. He attributed the success of this campaign to the increasing use of technology by the department, especially on payment of vehicle taxes and registration of vehicles. Arun Bora, DTO, Dima Hasao, told this reporter over phone that they have achieved 95% of their target on February 22, the date he spoke to this reporter. "We have managed this on the back of registration of new vehicles and collection of dues," Bora said.

## Top 3 performing District till 31st Jan, 2023 in FY 2022-23 (Completion of Target)

- Dima Hasao : ₹ 4.15 Crore (87.27%)
- South Salmara : ₹ 2.55 Crore (85.58%)
- Jorhat : ₹ 51.72 Crore (85.17%)

## Top 3 performing District till 31st Jan, 2023 in FY 2022-23 (Total Revenue)

- Kamrup Metropolitan : ₹ 286.85 Crore
- Dibrugarh : ₹ 55.69 Crore
- Nagaon : ₹ 52.01 Crore

# Vety Dept to be revamped : CM



Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma with his Cabinet colleagues in the programme.

AB BUREAU, JAGIROAD

Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma has said that his Government is working to revamp the Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Department to make it as competent as the Health and Family Welfare Department. He said that new posts for veterinary officers will be created to cater to the treatment requirements of the livestock population of Assam.

He said this in his address after handing over appointment letters to 210 candidates from the Departments of Fishery, Animal

Husbandry and Veterinary, Industries, Commerce and Public Enterprises and Public Health Engineering at a function held at Srimanta Sankardev Kalakshetra in Guwahati.

He presented appointment letters to 161 veterinary officers and 32 Fisheries Development Officers. Moreover 13 appointment letters were given for the Industries and Commerce Department and four for PHE.

Speaking on the occasion, Dr. Sarma said that giving appointments to the qualified and

competent youth of the State is another step towards increasing and promoting public service in the Fishery, Animal Husbandry and Veterinary sectors of the state.

Stating that Fishery, Animal Husbandry and Veterinary are important sectors which have the potential to expedite the growth trajectory of the State, the Chief Minister said his Government is taking several steps to add momentum to these sectors.

He asked the newly recruited officers to render their services dedicatedly and establish special rapport with the people of their place of postings. Stating on the need of role models in the society, the Chief Minister said that dedication and decorum on the part of the newly recruited officers would go a long way in nurturing the young generation in conformity with the requirement of the society.

Expressing satisfaction on the new appointments, the Chief Minister said that his government is progressing well in fulfilling its commitment of giving 1 lakh Government jobs to the youth.

Atul Bora, Minister for Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Veterinary; Parimal Suklabaidya, the Minister for Fishery also spoke in the meeting which was also attended among others by Power and Cooperation Minister Nandita Garlosa, Minister Revenue and Disaster Management, others, Jogen Mohan; Industries, Commerce and Public Enterprises Minister Bimal Bora, et al.





# You've got a file eOffice makes it easy

## AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

If you have ever experienced a Government office, chances are that you must have crossed heaps of files piled in rows and columns, some dusty, some torn, and some dated. You may have squeezed yourself through these rows and columns to avoid the dust settling on your clothes, or may have sneezed after getting past them. It was another matter that the file for which you had been to the office was not there!

The Assam Government, too, felt it. And that is why, it has said on your behalf: Enough is Enough.

Thanks to advances in information technology and to the National Informatics Centre the irritating experience will soon be history for you and lakhs of citizens across Assam. The NIC is putting in place an eOffice where files will be digitised through a web-based application to facilitate their permanent presence or their use till they are ready to be deleted once and for all in sync with the set objective: Record, Retain, Review and Archive. One of the key objectives of eOffice is to ensure a citizen-centric governance for people of the State.

"The genesis of eOffice can be attributed to the launching of Mission Sadbhavna by Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma on February 1, 2022. The Mission was aimed at reducing the necessity of people to visit the Assam Secretariat from different parts of Assam for their problems as well as reduce footfalls in these offices," State Informatics Officer, NIC, Dr. Suchitra Pyarelal told *Asom Barta*.

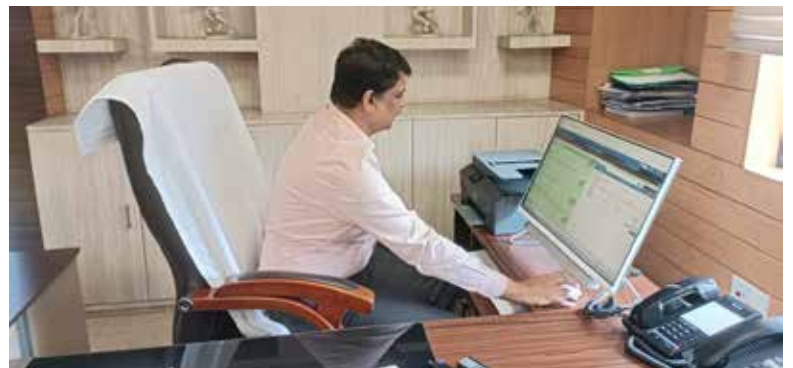
The eOffice now has been implemented in all the Departments of the Assam Secretariat, paving the way for a digital secretariat.

"I experimented with the eOffice in Samagra Siksha Abhijan by digitising records in the year 2021. It did not pick up momentum but when the Chief Minister made it a policy, the scenario changed. Today, I think the Education Department is ahead of all when it comes to eOffice," said Kalyan Chakravarthy, Principal Secretary, SEED, Cooperation and Labour departments, adding that "there is now a marked improvement in movement of files and reduction in loss of information."

Through Mission Sadbhavna, the Assam Secretariat filing process has become clean and transparent. The digitisation process of the Assam Government eOffice File Management System began on October 2, 2022. Since then, files are being raised through the electronic system, Anuradha Barua, Director (IT), NIC told this reporter.

"Since then, 12,484 files have been transferred to the eOffice system, while 53,266 files have been created. From January 1, 2023, offices of the Deputy Commissioners across the State began operating on the eOffice mode. The work on the districts began in October 2022, and by January this year, we realised that 8,777 e-files had already been created," she said.

"To make eOffice operational and effective, infrastructural requirements at the backend are important. All files follow a well-defined e-path. For this, it requires a high speed LAN and Wi-Fi, besides presence of an organisational structure at the department and State-level. capacity building and training facilities are also important," Dr. Pyarelal told this newsletter.



She informed *Asom Barta* that so far 150-plus training programmes have been conducted which have benefited over 4,500 users.

The eOffice has also managed to create a childlike enthusiasm among the employees and prospective users. An Assistant Section Officer of the Housing and Urban Affairs Department Ajit Das told this newsletter that he learnt the workings of eOffice with the help of his department colleagues. "It gave me a lot of satisfaction and I could realise how it can expedite work and help us track files," he said.

## Outcome of eOffice

- **Transparency & Accountability:** The documents or the files are preserved forever. There is no chance of the files being misplaced, modified, or lost.
- **Quick disposal of files and systematic, timely monitoring of pending files:** Exact position of receipts and files are available at any point of time to all required employees, which made file tracing a lot simpler and easier.
- **Instant file exchange:** The files from other departments/districts can be received within fraction of seconds, which previously used to take a number of days. This has also reduced the financial burden related to transport expenditures of the staff moving to and fro with the documents.
- **Go Paperless and Go Green:** eOffice promotes reduction in the usage of paperwork and boosts online communication with the government.
- **Bringing an institutional systematic change:** eOffice provides an effective monitoring mechanism to monitor the performance of individuals, pendency of files, files cleared, files worked on, leave status etc. on finger tips which was not available earlier.
- **Making public delivery systems efficient and corruption free:** eOffice brings avenues to improve the public delivery systems and eliminates malpractices in Government offices.





The newly appointed Governor of Assam, Gulab Chand Kataria being administered the oath of office and secrecy by the Chief Justice of Gauhati High Court Justice Sandeep Mehta at a function in Raj Bhawan.



Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma met Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the LGBI Airport after Mr. Modi returned from his day-long campaign in Nagaland and Meghalaya.



G20 delegation in Kaziranga National Park recently during their visit to Assam. They enjoyed Jeep Safari in the Bagori and Kohora Range of the Park.



Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma interacting with NCC cadets & NSS volunteers who took part in the Republic Day Parade in New Delhi.



Officials of the Assam Tourism Development Corporation and Pawan Hans Ltd during the signing in ceremony of an MoU between the two entities. As part of the understanding Pawan Hans Ltd will operate RCS flights under UDAN in Assam connecting four sectors.

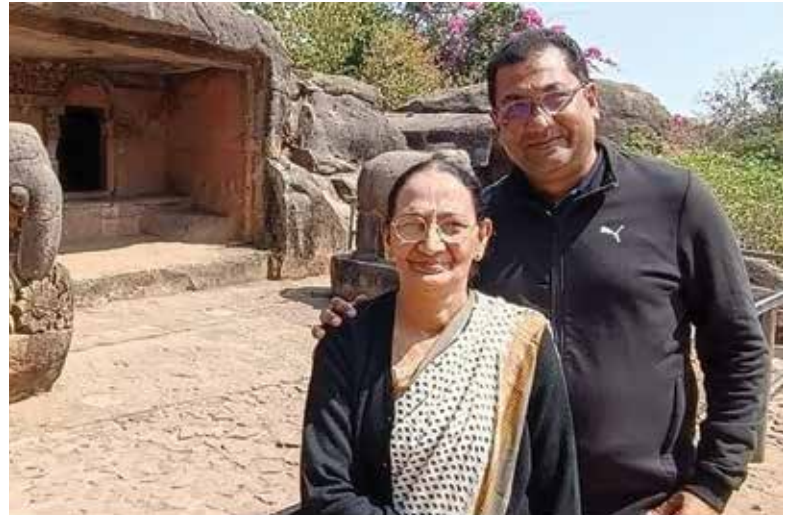




# 'These two days are special'



Lakhimpur MLA Manab Deka with his mother (seated) and wife.



Nagaon MLA Rupak Sarma with his mother.

## AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Work is the way to fulfil, read many Indian texts. But at times, this work makes life harder and more difficult. In the process, we even tend to forget and neglect those who are responsible for teaching us in the first place, the value of that work and the inherent beauty in it, that is, our parents.

In order to avoid situation and feeling like this, the Government of Assam, nay, the Assam Chief Minister conceived the idea of a two day 'paid leave' for employees, and legislators of the State so that they can spent quality time, away from the hustle and bustle of their public service, and with their parents.

Manab Deka, the MLA of 111 Lakhimpur Legislative Assembly Constituency told *Asom Barta* that even though he spends almost

15 days in a month in his constituency and therefore at his home, yet these two days were indeed special for him. "I get to spend more quality time with them knowing full well that these two days are meant for them," he told this reporter.

"I realised the value of my parents when I lost my father in 2004. Hence, this out of the box and humane thinking of our Chief Minister made me realise the importance of the day and the need to be with parents. Times have changed, and because of the nature of work, we have been forced to stay away from our parents. Yet, arrangements like these bring back the charm," he said.

"When I am home, my mother prepares a special delicacy for me. That is always special," he told this newsletter over the phone.

The General Administration Department of the Government of Assam declared February 9 and 10 as special holidays under the Pitri Matri Bandana Scheme to enable employees, officers, and legislators to be with their parents wherever they are so that they all can spend quality time off from their duties with their parents (including in-laws). The process was executed through the help of a portal specially designed for the occasion.

Rupak Sarma, the MLA of Nagaon took to his Facebook page to share some of his private moments with his mother by visiting the Jagannath Temple in Puri. "Ever since I became a legislator, I realised that I was unable to spend quality time with her. I am happy and blessed," he wrote of his experience.

## Over 41 lakh evaluated in Gunotsav 2023

### AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Gunotsav-2023 concluded in the second fortnight of February with the participation of 44,530 schools (Govt./Provincialised, Tea Garden Management schools, Adarsha Vidyalaya, Tea Garden Model schools, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya and Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Avasiya Vidyalaya) and evaluation of 41,27,907 students from classes I to IX by external evaluators in three phases.

The exercise began on January 18, 2023 wherein Cabinet ministers, MPs, and MLAS, bureaucrats, police officers, Grade-I and Grade-II officers visited schools in their capacity as external evaluators across the length and breadth of the State.

They evaluated the performance of the students on scholastic in both skill (reading, writing & numeracy/basic mathematical operations) and subject areas as well as other indicators of the schools.

Some of them also interacted with students, teachers, parents/guardians, community members etc. during their visit.

The third phase of Gunotsav-2023 began on February 15 and ended three days later eight districts namely Bongaigaon, Cachar, Darrang, Dibrugarh, Dima Hasao, Goalpara, Morigaon, Nalbari and in Biswanath (part of Sonitpur district). A total of 11,56,318 students from classes I to IX of 11,912 schools were evaluated in the last phase.

"Gunotsav has introduced us to newer and modern ways of educating children. It is a boon for institutions in the rural areas," said Bhupen Gohain, Principal (In-Charge) of Dibrugarh Sasoni Jamunamukh High Secondary School.



Gunotsav in progress Dibrugarh Sasoni Jamunamukh High Secondary School

One of the officers who evaluated schools in Chirang shared the enthusiasm of children, teachers and guardians from the district. "I was allotted three schools, one Primary and two Middle schools. The Primary School had 75 students from multi-ethnic backgrounds, whose education in Assamese and Bodo mediums was being taken care of by three teachers. The school was at the centre of ethnic strife a decade back, and there were challenges. Yet, the enthusiasm was there to see," he told *Asom Barta* on condition of anonymity.

He said that one of the Middle schools had over a hundred students with twelve teachers, and another had over 300 students with 13 teachers. He informed this reporter that in one middle school, an incident of a child marriage was reported.



## EDITORIAL

## A Timely Action

The State Government drive against child marriage in the State has solicited positive reviews across the caste, class, gender, and religion spectrum. Whereas it was long overdue, given the state of our society, what was surprising was that it took the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) data to jolt our conscience. Thanks to the political will displayed by the Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma and his Cabinet, we will now be able to prevent many social ills from getting entrenched in the system. One of them being the 'ransoming' of young girls due to poverty and other reasons.

What is indeed surprising is that despite the prevalence of laws like Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO), 2012 and the Prevention of Child Marriages Act (PCMA), 2006, previous dispensations in Assam were oblivious to the crisis that was evolving. Unofficial data put the figure of underaged brides and mothers at over one lakh in the State. We do not have enough data to state unequivocally how many lives have been lost because of the perpetration of this practice. Therefore, the State Government needs to be complemented for thinking through the problem, and initiating measures such as financial aid and rehabilitation of the 'victims'.

Critics of the Government and those who have political considerations to nurture will list reasons as to why this action should not have been initiated or executed in a different way, but then they will be found wanting in their homework. Any Government action against prevailing societal ills has ramifications. But as the drive goes on, it is known that solutions start emerging. It is in the light of this that the present drive must be weighed.

The sign of a mature Government is that it never refuses to learn and adapt. If course correction is required, it will be there. However, what cannot be disputed is that nothing is more important than an action whose time has come.

## Assam: A confluence of biodiversity

by Purnima Devi Barman



Some days back, Arend de Haas, the Programme Director of The Netherland-based Rewilding Academy came to meet me after the United Nations had honoured me for my conservation efforts. It was an unplanned visit. I did not get the chance to take him to Kaziranga or Manas wildlife sanctuaries. I did take him to Deepor Beel, the banks of the Brahmaputra in Amingaon, Dadara, Pasaria, Singimari, Agyathuri, Palashbari, and even places in Morigaon districts. At the end of it all he remarked, "You are right Purnima, I am in a Biodiversity Hotspot."

I feel you can internalise our nature, culture, food habits and our diversity in any place in Assam. The world is acknowledging us for our natural environment and wildlife. This is a matter of pride for us. The credit goes to the people of Assam for the rewilding and restoration efforts taking place in the State.

For the last two decades, I have been associated with the preservation of the hargilla (greater adjutant stork). Because of my activities at the grassroots, I have concluded that slowly but surely a renaissance of sorts is happening among the people vis-à-vis the wildlife.

Just a few days ago, someone called Diganta Das called me at 5 am from Jalukbari. He informed that he has seen two young birds akin to hargillas, lying on the road with injuries. It was a unique experience for him to see hargillas in the busy area of Jalukbari on the outskirts of the Guwahati metro. I could sense from his description that they were hargillas and it was their first ever flight. Whereas I reached out to forest officials, Diganta got in touch with the police. Thankfully, because of this joint effort involving the public, an activist, the government departments, the hargillas were rescued.

I am regularly contacted by many like Digantas from all over the State, especially from those areas where wildlife settlement is plentiful. I know that there is a greater degree of awareness. But of late, what has surprised me is that people call me up from places where they may not have ever seen a hargilla ever. I do not expect everyone in Assam to spot the difference between a hargilla and a lesser adjutant; they may not distinguish between an adult hargilla or a young one but what is important is whether he has the sensitivity and awareness towards wildlife. For example, once you spot an injured wildlife, it is important not to pour water over it or to surround it. It is here that I am noticing awareness building up in society.

In Assam, wherever such incidence occurs, the people reach out to police first. I feel that because this habit will be there for a long time, the police may be sensitised of the dos and don'ts while handling such calls. The police top brass needs to take this into consideration while planning the training programme of recruits and serving policemen.

The next step could be to activate the helpline of the Forest Department. Government websites and social media handles must do more to create awareness on how to rescue wildlife. The Government can go a step forward and think of establishing wildlife rescue centres. However, I must admit that because of the efforts of the Forest Department and the State Zoo, we have been able to rescue and rehabilitate more than 550 hargillas and birds. My experience with the administration in this is also very positive. In one instance, a Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup once offered me his personal vehicle to help us rescue a hargilla. We have received support from the police as well on many occasions. I am also noticing that forest officials down to the lowest rung are very active and incidences of inter-departmental cooperation have gone up many notches.

An incident that is imprinted on my mind is the day Namita Das of Dadara came to meet me demanding compensation for 10 ducks which she said hargillas have eaten. She came to know that I was working for the preservation of the hargillas. This was some 14-years earlier. When she heard me at a meeting in Sankardev Sishu Niketan. After she heard my speech, her mind changed. Today, she is one of the most active members of our 'Hargilla Army'. Change of heart is most important for the preservation of the environment.

In the course of my work, I have realised that nature and wildlife have bestowed us an atmosphere of sustainability. Our art and culture, our food and lifestyle, and handicraft are all part of that sustainability. It allows us to plant the seed of a sustainable economy. An example being sustainable eco-tourism. This is also one of our activities at the grassroots through our Hargilla Army.

The pro-active approach of the Government towards wildlife is now known to us. In 2021, I had spoken about this during the course of my TedX speech. We all know about the importance of rhino preservation and the efforts that have gone into it. In a similar vein, what is required are efforts to preserve hargilla, river dolphin, swamp deer and other wildlife. We need to create a campaign around them.

What I am proud of is "Yes, we are in a biodiversity hotspot."

(Purnima Barman is a wildlife activist who champions the cause of hargillas. She was awarded the highest UN environment award called Champion of the Earth for the year 2022.)

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