The laying of the foundation stone of the proposed Guwahati campus of the National Forensic Science University (NFSU) by Union Home Minister Amit Shah is a significant step towards strengthening forensic science for improving the criminal justice delivery system in the northeast region. The policy announcement by Shah that the Central Government will make forensic investigation mandatory in all criminal cases in which a minimum of six years of imprisonment is awarded upon conviction will require the forensic departments to be adequately staffed with trained professionals. Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma revealed that despite sustained and successful efforts by Assam Police officials in apprehending drug pedlars and drug dealers and making recoveries of huge quantities of illegal drugs and other contraband, many of those criminals have managed to come out on default bail due to police lacking the required capability of collecting strong forensic evidence and submitting it as irrefutable evidence in court. Assam Police recovered drugs worth Rs 1461 crore, which points to the gravity of the problem and the spectacular performance of the force in busting the drug cartels and criminal gangs. A major problem faced in the criminal justice delivery system, which was highlighted by both the Union Home Minister and the Chief Minister in their speeches at the foundation stone laying ceremony, is that of witnesses turning hostile and refusing to give the same statement in court that they had given to the police. The conviction rate still being less than 15% despite a significant increase from the level of 5.4% over the past two years speaks volumes about the wide gap in the criminal justice delivery system in the state. The collection and submission of forensic evidence can help the police and other investigating agencies present irrefutable evidence that leads to conviction and punishment for the convicts. Early completion of the construction of the Guwahati campus of the NFSU will be critical to bridging the gap without further delay. The NFSU’s signing of an agreement with the Assam Government to train 500 police officials in acquiring skills and knowledge in forensic evidence use in crime investigation is a laudable initiative. The NFSU came into existence following the enactment of the National Forensic Science Act, 2020, which seeks to establish the university as an institution of national

importance to facilitate and promote studies and research and to achieve excellence in the field of forensic science in conjunction with applied behavioural science studies, law, criminology, and other allied areas, as well as technology and other related fields. The Guwahati campus being initiated as the tenth campus of the university is indicative of the enlargement of the pool of forensic scientists in the country over the past two years and is demonstrative of the high priority of the government in that direction. The NFSU training for police officers also needs to focus on uniform best practises so that forensic evidence does not suffer from weaknesses in the scientific methodology followed and courts do not admit evidence without adequate scientific validation. The establishment of a National Cyber Forensic Science Laboratory (NCFSL) at the Central Forensic Science Laboratory, Hyderabad, to investigate important cases of digital fraud and cyber forensics, which acts as a model laboratory for other Central and State Forensic Science Laboratories in the country, has also emboldened the initiative to strengthen forensic science and update it to meet the requirement to prevent criminals from abusing digital technology to commit cybercrimes, which are on the rise. So far, cyber forensic-cum-training laboratories have been commissioned in 33 States and Union Territories with financial assistance provided by the Ministry of Home Affairs under the ‘Cyber Crime Prevention against Women and Children (CCPWC)’ Scheme to the States and Union Territories for their capacity building. Equipping the state forensic science departments with state-of-the-art technology, adequate funding for updating software, and the purchase of new and sufficient equipment is vital for the police to efficiently utilise the forensic services and ensure faster criminal convictions. Once a criminal gets away after committing a crime, by taking advantage of the loopholes in the criminal justice delivery system, the victims are perpetually deprived of justice and, in many cases, become victims of fresh crimes committed by those enlarged on bail or acquitted for want of evidence. Strengthening the judiciary parallel to improving the investigation is central to improving criminal justice delivery in the country. Unless more judges are appointed in the Supreme Court, High Courts, subordinate courts, or special courts, the evidence alone,

however irrefutable it may be due to the application of forensic science, will not help in fast-tracking and increasing convictions. When the cases continue to pile up in the courts due to a shortage of judges, even forensic evidence will also continue to pile up due to delays in listing the cases. Addressing the issue and strengthening forensic science are crucial for improving the criminal justice delivery system in the country.