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**PERSPECTIVE**

The problem is not the problem - The problem is your attitude about the problem.

**Coal Supply Halt from Meghalaya Pushes Tripura's Brick Industry to Brink of Shutdown**

**AGARTALA**  
Tripura's brick manufacturing sector is staring at a potential shutdown after coal supplies from neighbouring Meghalaya and other sources abruptly stopped over the past 15 days, leaving kiln owners struggling to sustain operations.

The industry, which depends heavily on coal-fired kilns for production, has reported that not a single truck carrying coal has entered the state in the last fortnight. The disruption has triggered an acute fuel shortage, forcing several units to suspend operations while others run on rapidly depleting reserves. Vivekananda Choudhury, president of the Tripura Brick Kiln Association, said the sector currently has no alternative mechanism to transport coal into the state by rail, making it entirely reliant on road supplies. "Not a single truck carrying coal has entered Tripura in the last fortnight," Choudhury said at a meeting with kiln owners from across the state. "Within the next week, no brick kiln in Tripura will be capable of running if alternative supplies are not arranged."

Tripura has around 300 brick kiln units that supply essential construction materials across the state and provide employment to thousands of workers. The sector plays a crucial role in supporting infrastructure projects and private construction activity.

However, production has already dropped sharply due to the twin challenges of coal scarcity and a shortage of skilled labour. Industry representatives said that many workers from Bihar, who form a significant part of the kiln workforce, have not returned this season, compounding operational difficulties.

**WHO SAID WHAT**



**"PM Modi was the first global leader to invite me to address his cabinet colleagues on AI" - Jensen Huang, CEO of Nvidia**

**Bhupen Kumar Borah to Join BJP on February 22, Announces Himanta**

**GUWAHATI**

In a significant political development ahead of the Assembly elections, former Assam Congress president Bhupen Kumar Borah will formally join the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on February 22, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma announced on Tuesday evening.

The announcement was made at a press conference held at Borah's residence in Ghoramara, Guwahati, shortly after the Chief Minister met the former state Congress chief. Sarma had earlier visited Borah's home for discussions regarding his political future.

"His joining will strengthen the party, particularly because he is a grassroots leader. He will formally join the BJP on February 22 in the presence



of Assam BJP president Dilip Saikia," Sarma said.

The Chief Minister described Borah as a leader with strong organisational experience and grassroots connect, adding that his induction would add depth to the BJP's ranks in the state. Sarma also claimed that Borah had faced prolonged struggles within the Congress and would now find a more conducive political platform in the BJP. In a politically charged remark, Sarma alleged that Borah's move would reflect broader dissatisfaction within the Congress, asserting that the party no longer represented the interests of Hindus in the state.

During the visit, Sarma was received at Borah's residence by members of his family. His wife and son welcomed the Chief Minister with a traditional 'aarti', underscoring the

cordial atmosphere surrounding the meeting.

Borah had tendered his resignation from the Congress on Monday. However, the party's central leadership reportedly did not accept his resignation and made efforts to persuade him to reconsider. Following those discussions, Borah had sought time to reflect on his decision before finalising his political course. Earlier, Sarma had publicly stated that the BJP's doors were open for Borah and assured support for him to contest from what he described as a "safe seat" in the forthcoming Assembly elections.

Borah's impending switch is being viewed as a major setback for the Assam Congress and a strategic gain for the BJP as political alignments begin to shift ahead of the state's next electoral battle.

**51 Kuki Students Shifted from Ukhrul JNV to Kangpokpi After Fresh Clashes in Manipur**



**UKHRUL/IMPHAL**

Fifty-one Kuki students were evacuated from Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya (JNV), Ramva, in Manipur's Ukhrul district following renewed tensions between the Tangkhul Naga and Kuki communities, police said on Tuesday.

The precautionary evacuation came in the wake of fresh violence in the Litan-Sareikhong area, where around 30 houses were reportedly set ablaze, intensifying fears of further unrest in the Naga-majority district.

In a statement, police said the students were safely moved under security escort. "The Ukhrul District Police have evacuated 51 students of Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya Ramva School in Ukhrul and handed them over to the Saikul police station team for onward movement to the JNV in Kangpokpi district," it said.

Of the total, 31 boys and 20 girls were transported to Kangpokpi, a Kuki-majority district, to ensure their safety as tensions persisted in parts of Ukhrul.

Brief Tension During Evacuation  
Authorities said the evacuation was carried out amid a fragile law and order situation. During the operation, some local residents reportedly mistook the students for miscreants, briefly escalating tensions in the area.

Police said local civil society organisations stepped in to defuse the situation. "Their efforts in persuading villagers across the Shangshak, Ramva, Shokvao, TM Kasom and S Laho areas ensured the safe evacuation of the students," the statement added.

Officials have appealed to all communities to maintain calm and refrain from spreading rumours that could aggravate tensions.

The latest violence was reportedly triggered by a drunken altercation between two groups in Litan on the evening of February 7. Litan is a commercial hub inhabited by both Tangkhul Nagas and Kukis. What began as a localised dispute soon escalated into wider clashes over the following days, culminating in arson and displacement.

The incident adds to the prolonged instability that has gripped Manipur since May 2023, when large-scale ethnic violence erupted between the Meitei and Kuki communities following a 'Tribal Solidarity March' in the hill districts. The march opposed the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe status, sparking widespread unrest across the state.

More than 260 people have lost their lives and thousands have been displaced since the outbreak of violence, making it one of the most severe internal conflicts in the state's recent history. President's Rule was imposed in Manipur on February 13 last year amid the continuing crisis. Earlier this month, Y Khemchand Singh was sworn in as Chief Minister as part of efforts to restore administrative stability and public confidence.

The evacuation of students from Ukhrul underscores the continuing volatility in parts of the hill districts, even as authorities attempt to prevent fresh flare-ups and reassure affected communities.

**Centre Sets Up 5G Lab at NIT Meghalaya to Boost Northeast's Digital Research Ecosystem**

**SHILLONG**

The Centre has established a state-of-the-art 5G laboratory at National Institute of Technology Meghalaya in East Khasi Hills district, marking a significant step in expanding next-generation technology infrastructure in the Northeast.

Officials said the facility has been set up under a nationwide initiative of the Department of Telecommunications aimed at accelerating research and development in advanced communication technologies.

With the commissioning of the NIT Meghalaya lab, eight 5G laboratories are now operational across the northeastern states, strengthening the region's digital innovation and research ecosystem.

Advanced Technology Access  
The new facility will provide students and researchers with hands-on access to cutting-edge technologies, including 5G networks, Internet of Things (IoT), Artificial Intelligence (AI), edge computing and other emerging digital systems.

Authorities stated that the lab is expected to significantly enhance skill development and research capacity, while fostering the creation of technology solutions tailored to the specific needs of the Northeast.

The initiative aligns with the Centre's flagship programmes such as Digital India and Atmanirbhar Bharat, which seek to build domestic technological capabilities and expand youth participation in high-end research and innovation.

According to officials, innovations emerging from the 5G labs are likely to support critical sectors including healthcare, education, agriculture, smart infrastructure and disaster management - areas considered vital for the region's long-term development.

**Assam Cabinet Approves 3% Job Quota for Tea Garden, Adivasi Communities; Clears Rs. 335 Crore for Second Sainik School**



**GUWAHATI**

The Assam Cabinet on Tuesday approved a 3 per cent reservation in Grade I and Grade II government jobs for Tea Garden and Adivasi communities, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma announced following a Cabinet meeting.

Addressing the media, Sarma said the decision was aimed at improving representation of Tea Garden and Adivasi communities in higher echelons of state government services.

"The Assam Cabinet has today decided to make a reservation of 3 per cent in Government Grade I and II jobs for Tea Garden and Adivasi people," the Chief Minister said, adding that the move reflects the government's commitment to inclusive development

and social equity.

The Tea Garden and Adivasi communities constitute a significant segment of Assam's population but have historically remained underrepresented in senior administrative positions. The newly approved quota is expected to facilitate greater access to decision-making roles within the state's bureaucratic framework.

335 Crore Approved for Second Sainik School

In another major decision, the Cabinet sanctioned 335 crore for the establishment of the state's second Sainik School. The new institution will be set up in the Langvoku area of Karbi Anglong district.

Sarma said the proposed school would enhance access to quality residential education, particularly for students in Upper Assam and the hill districts, and create more opportunities for those aspiring to join the armed forces.

Assam currently has one Sainik School — Sainik School Goalpara — and the new campus is intended to expand such facilities to underserved regions.

The Chief Minister said the initiative would strengthen educational infrastructure in Karbi Anglong and contribute to long-term human resource development in the region.

Both decisions, the government said, are part of broader efforts to promote social inclusion and expand educational opportunities across the state.

**GMCH Woman Doctor Alleges Harassment by Principal Achyut Baishya; Assam Govt Orders Inquiry**

**GUWAHATI**

A senior woman doctor at Gauhati Medical College and Hospital (GMCH) has accused the institution's principal, Achyut Baishya, of workplace harassment, prompting the registration of an FIR and the constitution of a government inquiry committee.

The Associate Professor and former Head of the Department of Clinical Psychology submitted a written complaint to the Chief Minister's Office on February 6, alleging inappropriate remarks, intimidation and sustained professional harassment during her tenure.

In her police complaint, the doctor stated that she initially received administrative support following the creation of the independent Department of Clinical Psychology. However, she alleged that the situation changed after the principal insisted that she meet him alone in his office building, even though routine official matters could be handled within the hospital premises.



She claimed the request made her uncomfortable and that she avoided the meeting. According to her complaint, their communi-

cations were documented through WhatsApp messages.

The doctor further alleged that during a subsequent interaction, the principal asked her to contact him when she was "absolutely free and alone" and remarked that she could meet him anytime as "the door was always open." She described the comments as inappropriate and distressing, particularly given the professional hierarchy.

She stated that the alleged conduct caused her considerable mental anguish and that, as a widowed woman and subordinate officer, she felt constrained in responding directly.

Beyond the alleged remarks, the doctor accused the principal of administrative victimisation. She said that despite the formal establishment of the Department of Clinical Psychology, she was initially not assigned charge as Head of Department, necessitating intervention by the Director of Medical Education.

She further alleged that her proposals to introduce academic pro-

grammes, recruit faculty and expand departmental activities were repeatedly delayed or obstructed.

In her complaint, she referred to a remark allegedly made by the principal - "don't go too fast or you will be derailed" - which she said caused emotional distress. She also claimed that during discussions on research initiatives, he suggested including his wife in departmental research projects, a suggestion she termed inappropriate.

The dispute escalated after a notification reportedly cancelled the Department of Clinical Psychology and merged it with another department. The doctor said she was not given a clear explanation for the decision and was later informed that some colleagues were opposed to her leadership.

She maintained that she had independently trained 57 interns and taken steps to expand mental health services before the department was dismantled.

FIR Registered, Inquiry Ordered  
Following her complaint, an FIR was registered at Panbazar Women

Police Station in Guwahati. A preliminary investigation is underway, and the complaint reportedly names multiple victims.

Responding to the allegations, Achyut Baishya said he had been directed by authorities not to comment publicly at this stage. He stated that he has prepared all relevant documents for submission before the inquiry committee and maintained that the department's takeover in July was carried out in accordance with a government notification. He also noted that the harassment complaint had been filed recently.

Meanwhile, the Assam Government has constituted a two-member inquiry committee comprising a senior woman advocate and a woman government officer to examine the allegations and submit its findings.

With both a police probe and a departmental inquiry in progress, the case has drawn attention to issues of workplace conduct, institutional accountability and the safety of women professionals in public institutions.



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## THE SUMMIT OF NODS

In New Delhi, venue is vocabulary. When the setting tilts toward monumental-vaulted ceilings, choreographed lighting, flags aligned with geometric precision the message is seldom about potholes or onion prices. It is about destiny. And when Bharat Mandapam fills up, the Republic is generally not convening to discuss municipal trivia. It is preparing to narrate the future-preferably in bullet points, accompanied by a logo and a slogan.

From February 16 to 20, that future has been branded the "India AI Impact Summit 2026." The title alone performs confidence. Presidents and prime ministers will share stage space with the unselected royalty of the algorithmic age. Among them: Sam Altman, Sundar Pichai and Bill Gates-figures who now occupy a peculiar category of global authority, somewhere between industrialist and oracle.

The guest list spans a hundred countries. Industry barons, policy mandarins, venture capitalists, tech evangelists and a scattering of professional sceptics will fill the rows. One hopes the sceptics are seated near the aisles. For the choreography of such gatherings has a rhythm: keynote optimism, panel affirmation, and applause that ripples like a well-trained reflex. Heads nod. Carefully, uniformly, reassuringly.

Artificial intelligence is perhaps the only technology in history whose most prominent architects admit-often with disarming candour-that they do not fully understand how it works internally. Large language models produce essays, poems, diagnoses and strategic plans, yet even frontier researchers struggle to explain precisely how a particular answer emerges from billions of parameters.

Energy consumption scales upward. Data centres multiply. Governments compete for compute capacity as once they competed for steel output. "Technology solution" now sounds less like an answer to climate anxiety and more like a wager against it. When billionaires such as Elon Musk and Peter Thiel speak of multi-planetary futures or radical longevity, it can feel as though the escape hatch is being designed alongside the engine.

In this context, the Delhi summit will attempt something subtler: to claim moral and intellectual co-authorship of the AI century.

India has appointed a global consultancy major as "knowledge partner." Another firm from the same elite consulting fraternity was recently embarrassed abroad for submitting a report generated substantially by an AI tool. That episode should serve as cautionary theatre. Instead, it risks becoming a punchline.

The new civic skill is composure. The new professional reflex is assent.

There are two words likely to echo across panel discussions: "guardrails" and "disruption." The first suggests moral vigilance. The second suggests market opportunity. Both are sufficiently elastic to accommodate contradiction.

Guardrails imply that policymakers understand what must be fenced in. Disruption implies that entrepreneurs are prepared to break what exists. Somewhere between them, India will narrate its desired transition-from back-office powerhouse to "cognitive power."

We have rehearsed this arrival before. The IT boom of the 1990s and 2000s delivered global brand recognition. American sitcoms found easy humour in Indian software engineers. Visa regimes tightened as outsourcing matured. Digital public infrastructure-especially payments architecture-became a source of genuine pride. India demonstrated scale. It proved that complexity could be operationalised.

But artificial intelligence is not business-process outsourcing with better graphics. It is automation with ambition.

The most arresting anxiety about AI has not emerged from factory floors. It has come from within glass towers and co-working spaces. Engineers, data annotators, prompt designers-many now confront a disquieting realisation: their daily labour is training the system that may one day replace them.

The irony is exquisite and cruel. The coders are drafting their own redundancy. Enterprise resource planners are discovering that planning itself can be automated. White-collar security, once presumed invulnerable, feels suddenly contingent.

For three decades, India's economic narrative rested heavily on a transnational professional class-the so-called creamy layer of software architects and systems integrators. They were the aspirational core of the middle class dream. Artificial intelligence threatens to thin that cream.

India's large tech firms, having exhausted the low-hanging fruit of labour arbitrage, now promise to "integrate AI" across product suites. Integration has become a talismanic phrase. It reassures investors that no enterprise will be left unenhanced by machine learning. Yet much of what is branded as sovereign innovation remains adaptation-fine-tuned, repurposed, open-source inheritance. There is a quiet danger here: rediscovering zero in the age of algorithms. Yet, paradoxically, India's historic complications may become assets. For decades, policymakers lamented linguistic multiplicity, behavioural diversity and administrative complexity. Standardisation was the dream. Uniformity was the ambition. Hundreds of languages, dialects and sociolects. Multiple scripts. Divergent culinary metaphors. Contradictory habits of expression. What was once bureaucratic chaos becomes computational richness. AI systems thrive on variation. India's lived plurality offers precisely that. In this framing, India is not merely a market. It is substrate. The summit will speak of multilingual AI, inclusive datasets, digital public infrastructure and ethical frameworks. It will insist that the future must not arrive in India subtitled. At the very least, it must be dubbed. Beneath that rhetoric lies a prickly pride: technological modernity should not feel imported. There is a deeper irony hovering over the proceedings, polite but insistent. For centuries, Indian intellectual traditions valorised thought as immersion rather than productivity. Debate was not content. It was culture. Disagreement was not a ratings war. It was a method of refinement. Knowledge was not merely competitive advantage; it was participation in a civilisational conversation. Liberalisation altered that grammar. Education became employability. Learning became mobility. Thinking became monetisable. Artificial intelligence now threatens to render even monetisable thinking optional.

When a machine can draft a legal brief, design a marketing strategy, compose a symphony pastiche and summarise a policy paper in seconds, what becomes of immersion? What becomes of disagreement? If generative systems synthesise consensus faster than humans can articulate dissent, will the nod become default?

### QUOTE OF THE DAY

"Being happy doesn't mean you have it all. It means being thankful for all you do have." - Nalan Avcı

# RECALIBRATING THE RIVERS: INDIA, BANGLADESH AND THE POLITICS OF A NEW MANDATE

R BHATTACHAJEE

On 12 February 2026, Bangladesh did more than elect a government-it rewrote the grammar of its politics. The decisive victory of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) under Tarique Rahman, alongside the passage of a sweeping constitutional referendum, formally closed the eighteen-month interim chapter that followed the dramatic fall of Sheikh Hasina.

For India, particularly for West Bengal and the Northeastern states with Assam at the centre of strategic concern, the change in Dhaka is neither distant nor abstract. It is intimate, historical and deeply consequential.

A Relationship Forged in War, Tempered by Suspicion

Indo-Bangladesh relations have long oscillated between solidarity and suspicion. In 1971, India stood unequivocally beside the Bengali nationalist movement led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The Liberation War forged not only a strategic alliance but an emotional bond rooted in shared sacrifice and trauma.

Between 1971 and 1975, the two countries enjoyed an unusual ideological alignment. Secular nationalism and post-war reconstruction shaped their cooperation. But Mujib's assassination in 1975 altered Bangladesh's political trajectory. The rise of military-backed regimes and the subsequent ascent of Ziaur Rahman introduced the doctrine of "Bangladeshi nationalism," consciously distancing the new state from the linguistic-cultural affinity it shared with India's West Bengal.

When the BNP first assumed power in the early 1990s, bilateral ties entered a phase of guarded engagement. Water sharing, migration, and border management emerged as persistent irritants. The brief return of the Awami League in the late 1990s led to pragmatic cooperation, including the landmark Ganges Water Treaty, but suspicion never fully dissipated.

The period between 2001 and 2006-when the BNP governed in coalition with Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami-remains etched in India's security memory as a nadir. Insurgent groups from India's Northeast, including the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), found sanctuary on Bangladesh soil. The infamous 10-truck arms haul in Chittagong exposed the transit of sophisticated weaponry, casting a long shadow over trust.

The "Golden Era" and Its Strategic Dividends

The years from 2009 to 2024 under Sheikh Hasina are frequently described as a "golden era" in bilateral ties. Dhaka adopted a zero-tolerance policy toward anti-India insurgent groups, enabling New Delhi to stabilize much of its Northeastern theatre. Militant leaders were apprehended or expelled, cross-border camps dismantled.

Long-pending disputes were resolved. The Land Boundary Agreement was implemented, enclaves exchanged, and adverse possessions settled. Electricity grids were linked; pipelines were built; coastal shipping agreements operationalized. Trade expanded to record levels, crossing \$13 billion.

For Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya and Mizoram, Bangladesh ceased to be merely a neighbour; it became an economic corridor. Transit routes through Bangladeshi territory shortened supply chains to the Northeast. West Bengal, bound by language and family ties across the border, experienced a relative calming of earlier anxieties.

This dense web of cooperation was not accidental. It reflected political will at the highest levels in both capitals.

The February 2026 Mandate: Sovereignty Reasserted

The 2026 election has shifted that equation. The BNP's commanding majority gives Tarique Rahman unprecedented authority. At the same time, an 11-party Islamist alliance led by Jamaat-e-Islami has emerged as the strongest opposition bloc in Bangladesh's history.

The constitutional referendum that accompanied the polls passed with nearly 73 percent support. It introduced term limits for the Prime Minister, established bicam-



eralism, and replaced references to "Bengali nationalism" and "secularism" with broader formulations centred on equality, dignity, social justice and religious freedom.

Symbolically, this signals a desire to redefine national identity less through cultural overlap with India and more through sovereign distinctiveness. For India, the message is nuanced rather than hostile: Bangladesh seeks recalibration, not rupture.

Security Fault Lines: Assam, Bengal and the Border

For India's Northeast, however, security considerations are immediate. The 4,096-kilometre border between the two countries remains porous, marked by riverine stretches, shifting chars and dense terrain. Stability in Dhaka has historically correlated with relative calm in Guwahati and Agartala.

During the 2001-2006 BNP-Jamaat period, insurgent safe havens aggravated violence in Assam. Under Hasina, decisive crackdowns curtailed these networks. The pressing question now is whether security cooperation will remain robust or become more transactional.

Militant outfits such as Ansarullah Bangla Team and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh have previously demonstrated cross-border reach. For West Bengal's sensitive districts-Malda and Murshidabad in particular-the interplay of demography, migration and radical messaging demands vigilance.

In Assam, migration remains politically charged. Identity debates, citizenship verification exercises and memories of agitation linger. Any perception of renewed infiltration or minority persecution across the border could rapidly inflame public sentiment.

Complicating matters further is the protracted Rohingya crisis centred in Cox's Bazar. Secondary movements of displaced populations sometimes spill across borders, adding pressure to already sensitive districts in India.

The Siliguri Corridor and Strategic Geometry

Few geographies are as symbolically charged in Indian strategic thought as the Siliguri Corridor-the narrow "Chicken's Neck" connecting mainland India to the Northeast. Its proximity to Bangladesh's Rangpur Division renders developments in northern Bangladesh closely scrutinized.

Infrastructure activity at Lalmonirhat, reportedly involving Chinese participation, has attracted attention in New Delhi. The concern is not imminent encirclement but long-term vulnerability. Should Dhaka tilt more decisively toward Beijing-or permit Pakistani intelligence manoeuvres greater latitude-the Northeast's security calculus would shift.

The spectre of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence reviving a "Dhaka Cell" often surfaces in Indian discourse. While such claims require rigorous verification, history demonstrates that geopolitical rivalries in South Asia have sometimes sought expression through proxy destabilization.

For the BNP leadership, therefore, sovereignty assertion must be balanced against the risk of Bangladesh becoming an arena for larger contests. Economic interdependence: Stakes Too High for Estrangement. Yet framing the transition purely through security anxieties would be reductive. Economic interdependence between India and Bangladesh has deepened substantially. Bangladesh's graduation from Least Developed Country status in 2026 introduces structural

challenges. Preferential tariff access will gradually diminish, compelling Dhaka to diversify markets and partnerships.

India, negotiating trade arrangements with the European Union and other blocs, may intensify competition in textiles and light manufacturing. Bangladesh, seeking to protect its export engine, could turn more energetically toward China or Southeast Asia.

Recent friction over Indian Economic Zone projects in Mirsarai and Mongla illustrates bureaucratic and political recalibration. Dhaka cited delays; New Delhi sensed diplomatic coolness. Such episodes underscore the fragility of assumptions built during a period of unusually smooth ties.

The BNP's "Bangladesh First" posture is not inherently anti-India. It is sovereignty-conscious. The lesson for New Delhi is clear: over-investment in a single political formation is strategically narrow. In South Asia's fluid politics, durable partnerships must be institutional rather than personality-driven.

West Bengal's Emotional Geography

For West Bengal, the transition is layered with memory and economics. Shared language, literature and music sustain a vibrant cultural continuum. Families straddle borders; poets and filmmakers circulate across them.

The removal of "secularism" from Bangladesh's constitutional vocabulary may resonate differently in Kolkata than in Dhaka. It does not necessarily imply regression, but it shifts symbolic language. Cultural intimacy will endure, yet political narratives can sharpen distinctions when domestic imperatives demand differentiation.

Assam's Delicate Equilibrium

If West Bengal's stake is emotional and economic, Assam's is existentially political. Migration has shaped its politics for decades. Citizenship debates and identity anxieties remain raw. Stability and inclusive governance in Bangladesh directly affect Assam's internal equilibrium.

Economic distress, climate change impacts in deltaic regions, or communal polarization across the border could generate displacement pressures. Even limited flows, magnified by political rhetoric, could trigger volatility.

Hence, Guwahati watches Dhaka not as a distant capital but as a determinant of its own social harmony.

A Strategy for New Delhi

How should India navigate this recalibration?

First, policy must be disentangled from personalities. Sheikh Hasina's presence in India after her ouster is diplomatically sensitive. Quiet, calibrated engagement-respecting legal processes while minimizing public theatrics-will be essential.

Second, New Delhi must reaffirm that its partnership is with the people and institutions of Bangladesh, not any single party. Institutional mechanisms for security cooperation, trade facilitation and water sharing should be insulated from electoral cycles.

Third, border management requires modernization. Joint patrols, intelligence sharing on extremist networks and humane enforcement practices can reduce friction. A "zero-killing" policy along the border-supported by technology and coordination-would address Bangladeshi sensitivities and deny propaganda oxygen to radical actors.

Fourth, economic integration should accelerate. Negotiating a Comprehensive Economic Partner-

ship Agreement before the full impact of LDC graduation is felt could cushion Bangladesh's export sectors while anchoring supply chains to the subcontinent. Sub-regional energy grids linking India, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh would create irreversible interdependence.

Infrastructure diversification for the Northeast-through internal corridors and Myanmar projects-should continue, not as signals of distrust but as prudent redundancy in a geopolitically uncertain region.

Finally, people-to-people engagement must deepen. Academic exchanges, journalist collaborations, historian dialogues and youth programmes can sustain trust when

### DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

**Arunachal Pradesh, new destination for adventure sports & eco-tourism in India! Excited to attend Tawang-Chu Tides spectacular - International Kayaking Championship 2026 Closing event at Bongleng-Kharung- Lungla along the majestic Tawangchu River in Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh. ~ Kiren Rijju, Union Minister & MP, Arunachal Pradesh**



political rhetoric fluctuates. The era of placing all diplomatic eggs in one basket must give way to engagement with the full spectrum of mainstream actors in Bangladesh.

Beyond Nostalgia, Toward Equilibrium

The February 12 mandate in Dhaka does not herald inevitable confrontation. It signals recalibration. Between the Padma and the Brahmaputra lies a geography that compels coexistence. Rivers ignore political cycles; they bind landscapes and livelihoods across borders.

Assam's peace, West Bengal's cultural continuity and the Northeast's connectivity remain intertwined with Bangladesh's internal trajectory. The strategic imagination required today is not nostalgic longing for a "golden era," but the crafting of a durable equilibrium suited to shifting realities.

If India approaches the new dispensation with patience, sovereign respect and economic imagination, the rivers that define this region can continue to connect rather than divide. In South Asia's evolving theatre, wisdom will lie in adaptation-not apprehension.

# Fresh Tension Flares Along Assam-Nagaland Border as Merapani Farmers Oppose Construction Bid

GUWAHATI

Tension resurfaced along the Assam-Nagaland border on Monday after farmers in the Merapani sector of Golaghat district opposed an alleged attempt by Nagaland authorities to resume construction on disputed land at a seed farm in Bheleguri.

Farmers operating under the banner of the Merapani Seed Farm Bhumi Adhikar Dabi Samiti lodged a complaint at the Merapani Police Station against the Nagaland Agriculture Department following the confrontation.

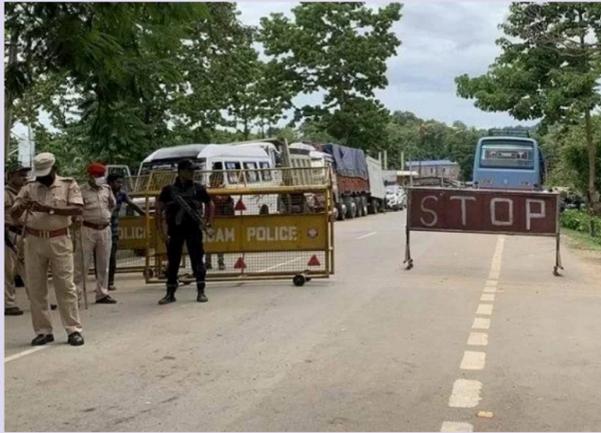
According to local residents, a large contingent of Nagaland Police, accompanied by officials of the Nagaland administration and representatives of the Merapani Village Council from Nagaland, arrived at the Seed Farm site with the apparent intention of resuming construction of permanent reinforced

cement concrete (RCC) structures. Villagers quickly gathered at the location and opposed the move, prompting the visiting team to withdraw.

Anil Bora, Secretary of the Samiti, alleged that earlier attempts to construct RCC structures had been halted by local residents, who had sent back mason workers engaged for the project. On noticing the return of officials on Monday, villagers assembled at the site and confronted the authorities.

Bora further claimed that during the exchange, a CRPF camp commandant questioned whether the villagers' assembly had political motives and treated them with disrespect. He maintained that the protest was aimed solely at preventing encroachment and safeguarding what residents assert is Assam's land.

Prasanta Chutiya, Joint Secretary



of the Samiti, expressed apprehension that the proposed construction in Sector D of the Seed Farm at Joy-pur village could eventually be converted into a Nagaland Police camp. He alleged that Nyamo Odyuo, Chairman of the Merapani Village Council, had visited the site along with 20-30 police personnel and members of the Naga community to discuss construction plans, but villagers intervened and asked them to leave.

The disputed tract in Sector D reportedly spans nearly 1,200 acres. Residents said previous attempts by the Nagaland Agriculture Department to plant oil palm saplings in the area were similarly opposed, with the saplings later removed following protests to prevent alleged displacement of Assamese farmers.

Recurring Flashpoint

The Merapani sector has wit-

nessed repeated flare-ups in recent months, underscoring the fragile situation along the long-disputed Assam-Nagaland boundary. On February 15, tension was reported in Urimghat following alleged attacks on CRPF personnel. Earlier, on December 15, 2025, reports of armed attacks on Assamese villagers had triggered panic in the area.

The Assam-Nagaland border dispute, one of the oldest inter-state boundary issues in the Northeast, continues to generate periodic friction despite ongoing efforts at administrative coordination between Assam and Nagaland.

Monday's incident has once again highlighted the sensitivity and volatility of the Merapani belt, with local residents demanding clarity and protection of what they claim as their land rights.

## 52nd Karbi Youth Festival begins

SUSHANTA ROY

**DIPHU** :The 52nd Karbi Youth Festival has begun at Taralangso, regarded as the largest ethnic festival of Northeast India, at the Karbi People's Hall located at the fringe of Diphu, the administrative headquarter of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council.

Karbi People's Hall, is extended across 800 bighas of land, in hilly topography, the location will be visited by large gatherings of ethnic artists and other performers during the five-day celebration to showcase Karbi culture, traditions and community life.

The opening ceremony was led by Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council's Chief Executive Member Tuliram Ronghang, while Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma is scheduled to visit the festival tomorrow.

The event is paying attention of foreign nations, representatives from the embassies of Hungary, Nepal and Taiwan expected to attend, along with intellectuals, writers and political leaders from neighboring states.

Organizers informed that, this year's festival will give emphasis to both celebration and discipline, with strict monitoring on the sale and consumption of commercial alcohol, while indigenous brews will be permitted.

Food stalls will chiefly present traditional Karbi cuisine. Officials expressed confidence that, despite financial constraints, the festival will be held with customary enthusiasm and artistic sumptuousness.

## Open Letter to Union Home Minister Ahead of Barak Valley Visit Raises NRC, Border Concerns

OUR CORRESPONDENT

**SILCHAR**:A civil society platform, Barak Democratic Front, has issued an open letter to Union Home Minister Amit Shah ahead of his proposed visit to Barak Valley on February 20, welcoming his arrival while raising key concerns over illegal infiltration and the unfinished NRC process in Assam.

In the letter signed by Chief Convener Pradip Dutta Roy and other conveners, the organisation described the Minister's visit as an important opportunity to address long standing socio economic challenges faced by the region. It urged the Centre to announce concrete plans to boost development and reduce deprivation in Barak Valley.

The letter questioned the continued narrative of illegal infiltration from Bangladesh, pointing out that border security falls under the jurisdiction of central agencies. It asked whether ongoing infiltration, if any, reflects gaps in border management under the Union Home Ministry.

The group also highlighted the unresolved status of nearly 19 lakh

people excluded from the final NRC list, stating that the absence of follow up action despite significant public expenditure has prolonged uncertainty in Assam.

Seeking transparency, the Front requested the publication of a white paper detailing the number of illegal infiltrators detected and deported during the past decade under BJP rule at both state and central levels.

The letter further called for completion of border fencing and installation of modern surveillance systems, along with immediate steps to conclude the pending NRC process.

While asserting that no illegal infiltrator should remain in the country, the signatories cautioned against repeated political rhetoric without tangible action, urging the Home Minister to address the issue with administrative clarity rather than electoral messaging. The letter was jointly issued by Roy along with Joydeep Bhattacharjee, Hrishikesh Dey, Haradhan Dutta, Debayan Deb and Nabarun Dey Choudhury on behalf of the Silchar based Barak Democratic Front.

## Rakibul Hussain Counters CM's Forecast, Predicts 70-80 Seats for Congress in 2026 Assam Polls

NAGAON

Rakibul Hussain on Sunday rejected Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's prediction that the Congress would be reduced to 24 seats in the 2026 Assam Assembly elections, asserting instead that his party is poised for a major resurgence.

Addressing a press conference in Nagaon, the Congress MP projected that the party would secure between 70 and 80 seats statewide, offering a region-wise breakdown to support his claim. "This time, the arithmetic will change," Hussain declared, expressing confidence in what he described as a strong electoral comeback.

Hussain outlined a detailed constituency calculation, beginning with Upper Assam, where he estimated the Congress would win 17 to 18 seats. According to him, the party would secure three seats each in Tinsukia, Dibrugarh and Sivasagar districts, one in Charaideo, four in Jorhat, a "guaranteed" victory in Majuli,

and three in Golaghat.

In North Assam, he projected around eight seats across Dhemaji, Sissiborgaon, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Biswanath and Gohpur constituencies.

Turning to the Barak Valley, Hussain said the Congress would win seven of the 13 seats in the region.

In Karbi Anglong, he predicted the party would capture three out of five seats. For Middle Assam, he estimated three to four seats, while in Kamrup district, including Nalbari, he projected five seats for the Congress.

The projections come in response to Sarma's recent claim that the Congress would be confined to just 24 seats in the 2026 elections.

Stepping up his attack, Hussain alleged that concerns over the BJP's electoral prospects have surfaced even within the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Referring to what he described as an internal communication from the RSS, he claimed it acknowledged

that under Sarma's leadership, the BJP's political momentum in Assam has weakened and could be limited to 30-40 seats in the upcoming polls.

He further alleged that the BJP is facing a shortage of credible candidates and is attempting to induct leaders from the Congress ranks. Describing the BJP's organisational condition in Upper Assam as "fragile," Hussain claimed that dissatisfaction within the ruling party would reflect in the election results.

Addressing speculation over the possible resignation of Assam Pradesh Congress Committee president Bhupen Kumar Borah, Hussain dismissed reports of an impending exit. He acknowledged that Borah may have grievances but said these would be resolved through dialogue within the party.

"Bhupen Borah is needed in the party. Whatever has upset him will be discussed, and we will try to ensure he continues with the Congress," Hussain said.

Hussain also raised the issue of rhino poaching in Kaziranga National Park, levelling serious allegations regarding past incidents.

He claimed that surrendered militants were involved in rhino killings and alleged that the crimes were carried out at the behest of influential individuals.

The Congress leader further alleged that Sarma had opposed the formation of a dedicated battalion in Kaziranga aimed at curbing rhino poaching, a charge that is likely to draw a response from the state government.

With less than a year remaining before the 2026 Assembly elections, the exchange underscores an intensifying political battle between the BJP and the Congress in Assam. As both sides roll out seat projections and trade accusations, the contest appears set to sharpen in the months ahead, with regional arithmetic and organisational strength emerging as key themes in the run-up to the polls.

## Congress Suffers Setback as West Goalpara MLA Abdur Rashid Mandal Joins Rajior Dal

GUWAHATI

The Congress in Assam suffered another setback ahead of the 2026 Assembly elections with West Goalpara MLA Abdur Rashid Mandal resigning from the party and formally joining Rajior Dal on Monday.

Mandal, a three-time legislator from Goalpara West, joined the regional party in the presence of Rajior Dal president Akhil Gogoi at a programme held in Guwahati. Dulal Baruah, chief adviser of the Tai Ahom Students' Union, also joined the party on the occasion.

The development came just hours after former Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) president Bhupen Kumar Borah submitted his resignation letter - a move that was later claimed to have been withdrawn by AICC general secretary in-charge of Assam, Jitendra

Singh.

Explaining his decision, Mandal said he felt marginalised within the Congress. "As a Congress MLA, I felt like an unemployed person within the party. I did not get the opportunity to work for the people. That is why I have come to Rajior Dal to work as a labourer for the people," he said.

Baruah, meanwhile, stated that he had been socially associated with the newly formed Sivasagar constituency for over two decades and joined Rajior Dal to safeguard community interests.

Addressing party workers, Akhil Gogoi claimed that more legislators are in contact with Rajior Dal and hinted at possible defections in the coming days.

"Within the coming week, two BJP MLAs from Upper Assam will join Rajior Dal. The process has been slow as the seat-sharing arrangement with Congress has not

yet been finalised," he said. Gogoi further claimed that one MLA from the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and five legislators from the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) have also been in touch regarding a possible switch, though he added that no final decision has been taken.

"If we wish, even 10 AIUDF MLAs can join Rajior Dal today," he asserted, adding that the party would induct only those leaders with strong electoral prospects.

Rajior Dal, which secured one seat in the 2021 Assembly polls, is now targeting 10 to 15 seats in the 2026 elections.

"In 2021, Rajior Dal will form the government," Gogoi said, expressing long-term ambitions for the party. He also announced that Sherman Ali Ahmed would join the party at Kalagachia on Tuesday.

Seat-Sharing Talks with CongressOn alliance negotiations,

Gogoi said Rajior Dal has sought 15 constituencies in seat-sharing discussions with the Congress and has formally submitted a list.

"Out of the 15 seats we have demanded, the Congress has agreed to give us 12 seats. The remaining three constituencies will be decided by them," he said.

Referring to the recent resignation episode involving Bhupen Borah, Gogoi maintained that Borah would not join the BJP and urged the Congress leadership to provide him with greater political space.

"Give him a little more space and do not do anything that would harm his dignity," Gogoi said, adding that he would personally meet Borah again.

He also took a swipe at Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, accusing him of trying to attract leaders from other parties rather than consolidating his own.

## Meghalaya Cabinet Sets GHADC Poll Date, Clears Police Commission and Key Projects



KRC TIMES NEWS DESK

**SHILLONG**: The State Cabinet has fixed April 10, 2026 as the date for elections to the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council.

Polling will be held on April 10 and counting will take place on April 14. The gazette notice will be issued on March 9. The last date for filing nominations is March 16. Scrutiny will be done the same day after 3 pm. Candidates can withdraw till March 17. The final list with symbols will be ready by March 18.

The Cabinet also approved the setting up of the Police Accountability Commission

under the Meghalaya Police Act 2010. Retired IAS officer Peter Ingty will head the panel as Chairman. Retired IAS officer V R Syiem will serve as member.

In another key move, revised cost estimates were cleared for major sports works linked to the upcoming National Games of India. These include the Aquatic and Tennis Complex at Umsawli, the Umsawli Hostel Block, Sunny Hills in Tura, and the Pa Togan Nengminja Sangma Athletic Stadium.

The Cabinet also gave its nod to the Meghalaya Flood Plain Zoning Bill 2026.

## 'Illegal Coal Mining Will Not Go Unchecked': 62 FIRs Filed, 15,224 MT Coal Seized After East Jaintia Hills Blast

SHILLONG

Meghalaya has registered 62 FIRs related to illegal coal extraction and seized 15,224.72 metric tonnes of coal in the aftermath of the February 5 explosion at an unlawful mining site in Mynsngat in East Jaintia Hills district, Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma informed the Assembly on Monday.

Delivering a suo motu statement in the House, Sangma said 57 of the 62 FIRs were filed after the blast, while five had been registered earlier. In addition, five FIRs pertain to illegal transportation of coal and two relate to the seizure of explosives.

Seven persons have been arrested in connection with the illegal mining and transportation cases, apart from seven individuals arrested directly in connection with the February 5 incident. Enforcement Intensified

The Chief Minister said six cranes used for illegal coal extraction have been dismantled till February 13 under Section 152 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, with the process continuing. Six vehicles involved in illegal transportation have also been seized.

Prohibitory orders under Section 163 of the same law have been promulgated in and around mining sites in East Jaintia Hills to prevent obstruction of enforcement operations.

To strengthen ground action, five additional teams comprising executive magistrates, police personnel and officials from the Directorate of



Mineral Resources have been deployed to conduct daily raids. The state has also deputed six gazetted officers, eight sub-inspectors and four platoons of armed battalion personnel. Drones are being used to monitor remote and inaccessible mining areas.

"The state government is committed towards ensuring that illegal coal mining and illegal transportation do not go unchecked," Sangma said, asserting that enforcement efforts would be sustained.

Death Toll at 33

Referring to the blast, Sangma said the explosion was reported on the morning of February 5 at an illegal mining site in Mynsngat, Thangsko area of East Jaintia Hills.

Fire and emergency services, along with medical teams, launched coordinated search and rescue operations. Eighteen bodies were recovered on the first day, four on February 6 and two on February 7. Eight injured persons were rescued, of whom four later succumbed to injuries on February 6, 9, 10 and 11 at the North Eastern Indira Gandhi Regional Institute of Health and

Medical Sciences in Shillong and a private hospital in Guwahati.

Two additional deaths reported by families on February 6 were subsequently verified by authorities.

"So, the total reported deaths as of today, February 16, 2026, number 33," the Chief Minister said. Rescue operations were formally closed at 5 pm on February 9 after consultations with all agencies.

Preliminary findings suggest that the explosion was likely triggered by the use of explosive substances during illegal mining operations. Unstable ground conditions, confined underground passages, debris, and the presence of machinery and explosives posed significant risks to both survivors and rescue personnel.

SIT, Judicial Probe Announced

A suo motu FIR has been registered at Kliehriat police station under provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, and the Explosive Substances Act. A Special Investigation Team headed by the DIG, Eastern Range,

was constituted on February 12 to probe the incident.

The state government has also notified a Judicial Inquiry Commission under the Commission of Inquiry Act on February 14. The panel, headed by Justice (Retd.) R.S. Chauhan, former Chief Justice of the Uttarakhand and Telangana High Courts, has been given six months to submit its report.

The Commission's mandate includes examining the circumstances leading to the tragedy, identifying any failure on the part of authorities to prevent the February 5 incident, probing the root causes of illegal coal mining in Meghalaya, and recommending administrative and institutional reforms.

Relief measures have been initiated for affected families. An amount of Rs 24 lakh has been disbursed to the next of kin of eight deceased persons, with the process ongoing for the remaining families. Authorities said daily communication is being maintained to facilitate documentation and assistance.

Earlier, Governor C.H. Vijayashankar told the House that thousands who depended on coal mining lost their livelihoods following the ban on rat-hole mining imposed by the National Green Tribunal in 2014 and upheld by the Supreme Court. He said the state is moving towards regulated and sustainable mining, with three projects having received final approval and 20 more applications at advanced stages of clearance.

The Meghalaya Budget for 2026-27 is scheduled to be presented on February 20, with illegal mining, regulatory oversight and governance reforms expected to dominate the Assembly session, which will continue till February 27.

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## Union Minister JP Nadda to launch SAHI and BODH initiative at India AI Impact Summit



NEW DELHI

Health and Family Welfare Union Minister, JP Nadda, will launch two landmark national initiatives, one the Strategy for Artificial Intelligence in Healthcare for India (SAHI), and the other the Benchmarking Open Data Platform for Health AI (BODH), at the India AI Impact Summit at Bharat Mandapam on Tuesday, as per the official press release by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

According to the press release, SAHI is a national guidance framework to enable the safe, ethical, evidence-based, and inclusive adoption of

Artificial Intelligence across India's healthcare system.

It aims to provide strategic direction for governance, data stewardship, validation, deployment, and monitoring of AI solutions, while supporting States and institutions in the responsible adoption of AI solutions aligned with public health priorities.

BODH, developed by the Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur in collaboration with the National Health Authority, is a privacy-preserving benchmarking platform that enables rigorous evaluation of AI models using diverse, real-world health data without sharing underlying datasets.

As a digital public good under the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission, it is designed to strengthen trust, transparency, and quality assurance in the deployment of Health AI.

Together, SAHI and BODH mark a significant step in India's journey towards building a robust, responsible, and globally competitive health AI ecosystem, the press release said.

The Summit is the first global AI gathering to be hosted in the Global South and has drawn participation from over 20 Heads of State, 60 Ministers and 500 global AI leaders. Policymakers, technology companies, academia and industry representatives are attending the event, which aims to translate AI discussions into development outcomes under the IndiaAI Mission and the Digital India initiative.

The Prime Minister is scheduled to deliver the inaugural address of the Summit on February 19. After inaugurating the Expo, he met with exhibitors, including startups and research institutions, to showcase AI applications across sectors. He was accompanied by Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw and Minister of State Jitin Prasada.

The Expo spans 10 arenas across more than 70,000 square metres and features over 300 exhibition pavilions. More than 600 startups are participating, and the event is expected to draw over 2.5 lakh visitors, including international delegates.

## "Intelligence, rationality make technology useful": PM Modi underlines public interest focus of AI Impact Summit



NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said intelligence and rationality are essential to ensure that artificial intelligence benefits society, underlining the public interest focus of the India AI Impact Summit.

In a post on X, the Prime Minister stated, "Intelligence, rationality and decision-making make science and technology

useful to the masses. The India AI Impact Summit also aims to see how AI can be used in the public interest. Service, hearing, grasping and holding. Knowledge of the meaning and knowledge of the truth are the attributes of intellect."

His remarks come a day after he inaugurated the India AI Impact Summit 2026 at Bharat Mandapam in the national capital. The Prime Minister said the event brings

together innovators, researchers and technology enthusiasts, offering insight into the potential of artificial intelligence and Indian talent. "Inaugurated the India AI Impact Expo 2026 at Bharat Mandapam. Being here among innovators, researchers and tech enthusiasts gives a glimpse of the extraordinary potential of AI, Indian talent and innovation. Together, we will shape solutions not just for India but for the

world!" he posted on X.

Meanwhile, President & Chief Executive Officer, Mukesh Aghi underlined the critical importance of how India is leading the effort to ensure democratisation and diffusion of AI. "India has taken a very strong lead in trying to make AI more affordable, scalable, and accessible to its citizens. And it has one of the largest structured database to leverage that. So in every aspect, India is going to play a very pivotal role in AI on a global basis. I think the message to the rest of the world, especially the global South, is look at how India has been able to provide digital infrastructure with citizens, not only just from a payment perspective, but also leveraging AI in the future," he told. The Summit is the first global AI gathering to be hosted in the Global South and has drawn participation from over 20 Heads of State, 60 Ministers and 500 global AI leaders. Policymakers, technology companies, academia and industry representatives are attending the event, which aims to translate AI discussions into development outcomes under the IndiaAI Mission and the Digital India initiative. The Prime Minister is scheduled to deliver the inaugural address of the Summit on February 19. After inaugurating the Expo, he interacted with exhibitors, including startups and research institutions, showcasing AI applications across sectors. He was accompanied by Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw and Minister of State Jitin Prasada. The Expo spans 10 arenas across more than 70,000 square metres and features over 300 exhibition pavilions. More than 600 startups are participating, and the event is expected to draw over 2.5 lakh visitors, including international delegates.

## INTERNATIONAL

### Israeli approval of West Bank land registration draws outrage



JERUSALEM

Israel's government has approved a process to register land in the West Bank as "state property", drawing condemnation from Arab nations and critics who said it would accelerate annexation of the Palestinian territory.

Israel's foreign ministry said the measure, approved late Sunday, would enable "transparent and thorough clarification of rights to resolve legal disputes" and was needed after unlawful land registration in areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority.

But Egypt, Qatar and Jordan criticised the move as illegal under international law.

In a statement, the Egyptian government called it a "dangerous escalation aimed at consolidating Israeli control over the occupied Palestinian territories".

Qatar's foreign ministry condemned the "decision to convert West Bank lands into so-called 'state property'", saying it would "deprive the Palestinian people of their rights".

The Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority called for international intervention to prevent the "de facto beginning of the annexation process and the undermining of the foundations of the Palestinian state".

Israeli anti-settlement watchdog Peace Now called the measure a "mega land grab".

Jonathan Mizrahi, the Israeli NGO's co-director, told AFP on Monday that the measure would attribute new resources for land registration in the occupied West Bank.

The process will take place only in Area C, which constitutes some 60 percent of West Bank territory and is under Israeli security and administrative control.

"There was a lot of ambiguity regarding the land, and Israel decided now to deal with it," he said, adding that the existing ambiguity over Area C land ownership is likely to be used against Palestinians.

"A lot of land that Palestinians consider theirs, they will find out it's not theirs under this new reg-

istration process," he said, adding the move will further the Israeli right's annexation agenda.

Palestinians see the West Bank as foundational to any future Palestinian state, but many on Israel's religious right want to take over the land.

Last week, Israel's security cabinet approved a series of measures backed by far-right ministers to tighten control over areas of the West Bank administered by the Palestinian Authority under the Oslo accords, in place since the 1990s.

Those measures, which also sparked international backlash, include allowing Jewish Israelis to buy West Bank land directly and allowing Israeli authorities to administer certain religious sites in areas under the Palestinian Authority's control.

The latest Israeli initiatives come amid a wider context of increasing attacks by Israeli settlers against Palestinians in the territory, according to rights groups.

"We are witnessing rapid steps to change permanently the demography of the occupied Palestinian territory, stripping its people of their lands and forcing them to leave," UN rights chief Volker Turk said in a recent statement.

US President Donald Trump has opposed Israel's annexation of the West Bank, saying stability in the territory helps keep Israel secure.

However, Trump has held off from directly criticising the latest Israeli measures, despite the international outrage.

Excluding Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, more than 500,000 Israelis live in West Bank settlements and outposts, which are illegal under international law.

Around three million Palestinians live in the territory, which Israeli has occupied since 1967.

### Iran diplomat meets UN nuclear watchdog in Geneva ahead of a second round of US talks



GENEVA

Iran's top diplomat met with the head of the U.N. nuclear watchdog agency on Monday, ahead of a second round of negotiations with the United States over Tehran's nuclear program.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi met with Rafael Grossi, director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and said he would also meet with Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi of Oman, which is hosting the U.S.-Iran talks in Geneva on Tuesday.

"I am in Geneva with real ideas to achieve a fair and equitable deal," Araghchi wrote on X. "What is not on the table: submission before threats." On Sunday, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Majid Takht-Ravanchi signalled that Tehran could be open to compromise on the nuclear issue, but is looking for an easing of international sanctions led by the United States. "The ball is in America's court. They have to prove they want to have a deal with us," Takht-Ravanchi told the BBC. "If we see a sincerity on their part, I am sure that we will be on a road to have an agree-

ment." "We are ready to discuss this and other issues related to our program provided that they are also ready to talk about the sanctions," he added.

Oman hosted a first round of indirect talks between the U.S. and Iran on Feb. 6. The U.S. is also hosting talks between envoys from Russia and Ukraine in Geneva on Tuesday and Wednesday, days ahead of the fourth anniversary of the all-out Russian invasion of its neighbor. Similar talks last year between the U.S. and Iran about Iran's nuclear program broke down after Israel launched what became a 12-day war on Iran, that included the U.S. bombing Iranian nuclear sites. U.S. President Donald Trump initially threatened to take military action over Iran's bloody crackdown on nationwide protests last month, but then shifted to a pressure campaign in recent weeks to try to get Tehran to make a deal over its nuclear program.

Trump said Friday the USS Gerald R. Ford, the world's largest aircraft carrier, was being sent from the Caribbean to the Mideast to join other military assets

the U.S. has built up in the region. He also said a change in power in Iran "would be the best thing that could happen."

Iran has said if the U.S. attacks, it will respond with an attack of its own.

The Trump administration has maintained that Iran can have no uranium enrichment under any deal. Tehran says it won't agree to that.

Iran has insisted its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes. However, its officials increasingly threaten to pursue a nuclear weapon. Before the June war, Iran had been enriching uranium up to 60% purity, a short, technical step away from weapons-grade levels.

The direct meeting with Grossi is a significant step after Iran suspended all cooperation with the IAEA following the June war with Israel. The two also met briefly on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in September. The IAEA said it has been unable to verify the status of Iran's near weapons-grade uranium stockpile since the war. Iran has allowed IAEA some access to sites that were not damaged, but has not allowed inspectors to visit other sites.

Iran's stockpile of uranium enriched to 60% could allow Iran to build as many as 10 nuclear bombs, should it decide to weaponize its program, Grossi previously told The Associated Press. He added that it doesn't mean that Iran has such a weapon.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rushed to Washington last week to urge Trump to ensure that any deal to include steps to neutralize Iran's ballistic missile program and end its funding for proxy groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah.

## The Poet and the Valley: How Rabindranath Tagore Forged an Enduring Cultural Bond with Assam's Barak Valley

**M**ore than a century after his fleeting halt in southern Assam, the imprint of Rabindranath Tagore continues to shape the cultural, intellectual and emotional landscape of the Barak Valley. Though the Nobel laureate never formally visited Silchar town, his connections with the region-woven through family ties, personal correspondences, literary imagination and shared histories-created a relationship that outlived his lifetime and still resonates in the valley's public life.

The story of Tagore's bond with the Barak Valley is not one of grand public meetings or extended stays. Instead, it is a subtler narrative-of railway platforms, tea estates, letters, legal consultations and poetic references. Yet from these fragments emerged a cultural association so strong that today, in Silchar and beyond, Tagore is remembered not as a distant literary giant, but as an enduring presence in the valley's collective consciousness.

**A Brief Halt, A Lasting Impression**  
In 1919, during a journey from Guwahati to Sylhet-then part of undivided Bengal-Tagore briefly halted at Badarpur railway station in present-day Karimganj district. The stopover was short and unceremonious. There is no record of a formal reception or public address. Yet the moment has since acquired symbolic value in local memory.

Though he did not proceed to Silchar, the brief presence of the poet in the region marked a historical intersection. It was a time of intense political churn in India. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre had shaken the nation, and Tagore would soon renounce his knighthood in protest against British repression. His thoughts on nationalism, moral courage and the responsibilities of intellectuals were shaping public discourse across the subcontinent.

For the Bengali-speaking populace of the Barak Valley-culturally aligned with Bengal yet geographically part of Assam-Tagore's ideas on education, identity and cultural awakening found ready resonance. His lectures and essays, circulated widely in print, reached the valley through newspapers, literary societies and personal networks.

**The Family Thread: Tea Gardens and Colonial Assam**

One of the lesser-known yet significant aspects of Tagore's connection with the Barak Valley lies in the tea industry of colonial Assam. The historic Silcoorie Tea Estate in Cachar district figures in local narratives of this relationship. Tagore's nephew, Arunendranath Tagore, is believed to have served as an assistant manager there-an unusual distinction in an era when senior managerial positions in tea plantations were overwhelmingly dominated by British planters.

Arunendranath's role symbolised a gradual Indian entry into sectors previously monopolised by colonial authorities. It also reflected the Tagore family's engagement with wider economic and social processes beyond Bengal. The presence of a Tagore family member in the tea gardens of Cachar forged a tangible link between the poet's illustrious lineage and the everyday realities of Assam's plantation economy.

The tea industry, central to Assam's colonial history, was more than an economic enterprise. It shaped migration patterns, labour relations and social hierarchies. That a member of the Tagore family worked within this sphere created a subtle yet meaningful connection between the intellectual ferment of Bengal and the agrarian-industrial transformation of the Northeast.

**Naming a Place, Shaping Memory**  
Local historical accounts suggest that Tagore referred to Karimganj as "Sribhumi"-a name that continues to carry cultural weight in the district. Over time, "Sribhumi" became more than a poetic appellation; it evolved into a marker of regional pride and identity.

Place names often embody memory. In invoking "Sribhumi," Tagore seemed to ascribe sanctity and grace to the land. Whether through documented correspondence or oral tradition, the association strengthened the emotional bond between the poet and the people of southern Assam.

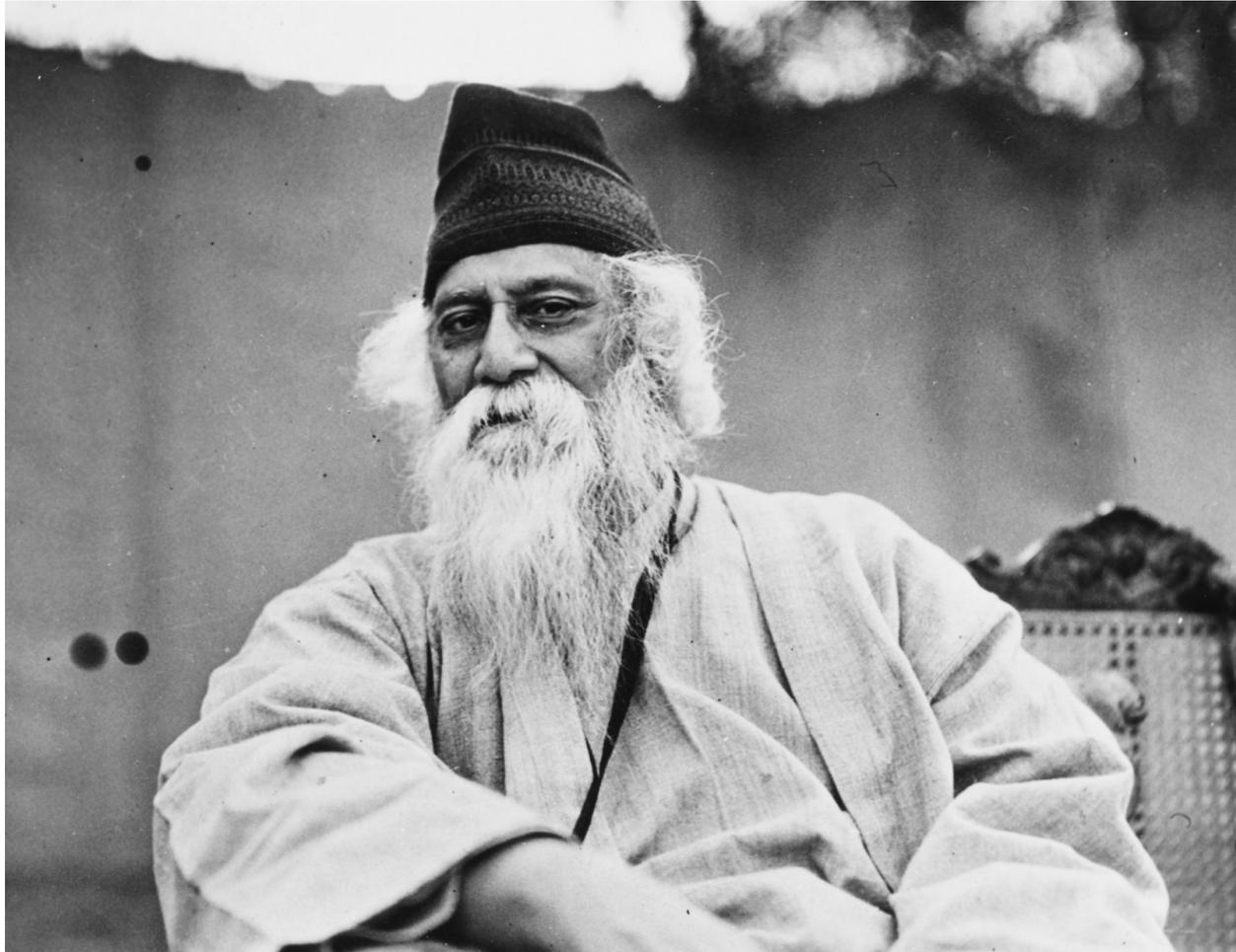
Today, in Silchar and neighbouring towns, roads, institutions and cultural organisations bear Tagore's name. These commemorations are not mere formalities. They reflect a deeply internalised reverence for his contributions to literature, music and philosophy. Rabindra Sangeet-his vast repertoire of songs-continues to echo through auditoriums, school functions and seasonal festivals in the valley.

**Legal and Intellectual Ties: The Chanda Connection**

The connection between Tagore and the Barak Valley was also reinforced through personal and legal associations. Tagore's father, Debendranath Tagore, is believed to have extended support to a prominent Silchar lawyer, Kamini Kumar Chanda, in matters related to tea estates. This professional relationship laid the groundwork for a deeper intellectual exchange between the Tagore family and local elites in Cachar.

Kamini Kumar Chanda emerged as a significant figure in Silchar's public life. Tagore is said to have affectionately referred to him as "Relchar," a nickname that suggests familiarity and warmth. Through Chanda, the intellectual currents of Bengal and the Barak Valley intersected in meaningful ways.

The Chanda family's association with Tagore did not end with Kamini Kumar. His son, Anil Kumar Chanda, later assisted Tagore in matters concerning Santiniketan, the experimental educational institution founded



by the poet. Santiniketan-today known globally through Visva-Bharati University-embodied Tagore's educational philosophy: a synthesis of Indian traditions and global humanism.

By contributing to Santiniketan's work, Anil Kumar Chanda helped extend the Barak Valley's intellectual footprint into Bengal's most celebrated cultural institution. It was a two-way exchange: ideas flowed from Santiniketan to Silchar, and from Silchar back to Bengal.

Another son, Arun Kumar Chanda, made notable contributions to education in Silchar. In recognition of his legacy, A.K. Chanda Law College in Tarapur was established, becoming a pillar of legal education in the region. Through these institutional links, Tagore's indirect association with the valley deepened into a shared intellectual heritage.

**In the Poet's Imagination**  
Tagore's connection with the Barak Valley was not confined to social networks or historical coincidences. It also entered the realm of literature. In his celebrated novel Shesher Kobita, the protagonist Amit Ray finds moments of bliss and introspection while wandering through the wild landscapes of Silchar and Sylhet.

This literary reference is significant. By situating his character in the environs of southern Assam, Tagore inscribed the region into his imaginative geography. The lush terrain, rolling hills and serene expanses of the Barak Valley offered a fitting backdrop for philosophical reflection and romantic yearning.

For readers in Silchar, the mention was more than a passing detail. It affirmed that their town-often peripheral in colonial administrative hierarchies-had found a place in the creative universe of one of India's greatest literary figures.

Literary geography matters. It shapes how communities see themselves and how they are seen by others. In Tagore's narrative world, Silchar was not an obscure outpost; it was a landscape capable of nurturing introspection and joy.

Rabindra Sangeet and Cultural Continuity

Over decades, Tagore's songs and plays became integral to the Barak Valley's cultural life. Rabindra Sangeet, with its blend of classical, folk and devotional influences, found enthusiastic audiences in Silchar's schools, cultural clubs and theatre groups.

Annual celebrations of Rabindra Jayanti-the poet's birth anniversary-draw participation across generations. Students perform his songs, recite his poetry and stage adaptations of his plays. These events are not mere ritual observances. They serve as reaffirmations of a shared linguistic and cultural identity.

In the Barak Valley, where the Bengali language forms a core element of regional identity within Assam's diverse mosaic, Tagore's works provide both artistic inspiration and cultural anchorage. His writings articulate universal humanism while remaining rooted in Bengali sensibility-a balance that resonates strongly in the valley's social fabric.

**Education and Enlightenment**  
Tagore's philosophy of education-emphasising creativity, moral courage and harmony with nature-found sympathetic reception among educators in the Barak Valley. Schools and colleges in Silchar often incorporate his poems and essays into curricula, reinforcing his intellectual legacy.

The influence is not limited to literature departments. Tagore's ideas about nationalism-critical yet compassionate-continue to inform discussions about identity in a region shaped by migration, linguistic assertion and historical transitions.

For the Barak Valley, which has navigated its own complex history within Assam, Tagore's inclusive vision offers a template for cultural coexistence. His

belief that regional pride need not conflict with universal humanism remains deeply relevant.

**A Century On**  
Today, more than a hundred years after his brief halt at Badarpur, Tagore's presence in the Barak Valley endures in layered forms-through family history, literary memory, institutional linkages and everyday cultural practice.

Silchar's streets named after him, the echoes of Rabindra Sangeet in auditoriums, and the academic legacy carried forward by institutions

such as A.K. Chanda Law College all testify to a bond that transcends geography. The relationship was not forged through prolonged residence or political mobilisation, but through shared imagination and intellectual kinship.

In an era when regional histories are being revisited and reclaimed, the story of Tagore and the Barak Valley stands as an example of how cultural connections often outlast physical journeys. A brief railway halt in 1919 may have been ephemeral, but the ideas, friendships and

artistic references that followed created a bridge between Bengal's renaissance and Assam's southern plains.

As Rabindra Jayanti continues to be celebrated with fervour in Silchar, the valley reaffirms its place within the wider orbit of Tagore's legacy. The poet who sang of humanity's unity and nature's grace remains woven into the cultural tapestry of the Barak Valley-an enduring testament to how literature can bind regions across distance and time.

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