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PERSPECTIVE

At the end of life, nobody remembers your bank balance, your job title, or your follower count. What people remember are the lives you touched, the kindness you showed, and the difference you made. - Harsh Goenka

Border Tensions Rise in Assam's Sribhumi After Alleged Pushback Attempt Sparks BSF-BGB Face-Off

SRIBHUMI
Tension gripped the India-Bangladesh border in Assam's Sribhumi district after an alleged pushback attempt led to a confrontation between the Border Security Force (BSF) and the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) in the Bilbari border sector.

According to reports, the situation remained tense throughout the day as security personnel from both sides maintained a heightened presence along the international border.

The standoff reportedly began when an attempt was allegedly made to move a group of Bangladeshi nationals towards the New Pallathal area across the border. The BGB is said to have objected to the move and prevented the group from entering Bangladeshi territory, triggering a face-off between the border forces.

As information about the incident spread, residents of nearby villages on the Bangladesh side reportedly gathered close to the border carrying sticks, bamboo poles and other makeshift weapons in support of the BGB personnel.

Sources said personnel stationed at the BGB's Pallathal Border Outpost repeatedly issued warnings through loudspeakers, urging the BSF not to proceed with what they described as an "illegal pushback" and to move away from the border area.

The BGB also reportedly warned that the situation could escalate if the group was not withdrawn, further heightening tensions in the sensitive border zone.

No reports of injuries or firing were received till the filing of this report. However, the incident triggered concern among residents living in the border belt as security forces on both sides remained on alert. Officials have not yet issued a detailed statement on the circumstances leading to the confrontation. The identities and status of the individuals at the centre of the alleged pushback attempt also remain unclear.

WHO SAID WHAT



Our roadmap for the fight against drugs is built on four pillars:

- Enforcement, Intelligence & Operations
- Precursor & Synthetic Drug Control
- Demand Reduction & Rehabilitation
- Capacity Building & Coordination

- Anil Shah, Union Home Minister

Drug Trafficking Routes Shifted to Mizoram After 2023 Crisis: Manipur CM

IMPHAL

Manipur Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh on Thursday said drug trafficking networks operating in the state have altered their routes following the ethnic violence that erupted in 2023, with a significant portion of illicit narcotics now being routed through Mizoram.

The Chief Minister made the remarks while addressing the observance of the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking 2026 at the City Convention Centre in Imphal. The event was organised by the Social Welfare Department under the theme, "World Drug Problem: Persisting Issues, New Challenges, Innovative Responses."

Speaking on the evolving nature of narcotics trafficking in the region, Singh said traditional smuggling channels have undergone major changes since the outbreak of ethnic unrest in



Manipur. According to the Chief Minister, a substantial volume of drug trafficking has shifted through Mizoram, while smaller consignments continue to enter Manipur through the border town of Moreh. He alleged that these consignments are transported to Churachandpur using roads developed under the Pradhan

Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana and subsequently distributed through the town of Kwakta. Reflecting on the history of drug abuse in Manipur, Singh recalled that heroin consumption began gaining prominence in the late 1970s and was initially limited to wealthier sections of society due to the high cost of narcotics. Over time, however,

drug abuse has spread across wider sections of the population, posing a major social challenge.

The Chief Minister cited a recent interaction with civil society organisations in Kwakta, where representatives reportedly informed him that nearly 70 per cent of local youth were involved in substance abuse.

He further alleged that drug peddlers often supply narcotics on credit, making them more accessible and increasing the risk of addiction among young people. Singh also expressed concern about the growing vulnerability of neighbouring areas such as Moirang, Kumbi and Thanga to drug-related problems. Highlighting preventive measures, the Chief Minister emphasised the importance of sports and youth engagement in combating substance abuse. Drawing from his own experience, he said participation in sports during his younger years helped keep him away from drugs and urged greater investment in sporting

IMPHAL

activities to steer youth away from addiction. Calling for a collective response, Singh said the fight against drugs cannot be left to the government alone and requires active participation from citizens, local clubs, Meira Paibi groups and civil society organisations. Also speaking at the event, Robert Singh Kshetri-mayum said drug addiction destroys not only individuals but entire families. He noted that a large proportion of substance abuse cases in Manipur involve people below the age of 20, with peer pressure and curiosity among the key factors driving addiction.

The programme was attended by Sheikh Abdul Hakim, representatives of non-governmental organisations, teachers, students and other stakeholders. During the event, memorandums were also submitted to the Chief Minister by private rehabilitation centres and the Welfare Association of Blind, Manipur

IMPHAL

The All Manipur Road Transport and Motor Workers Union has threatened to launch an indefinite strike from July 1 if authorities fail to restore and repair National Highway-37, the state's only operational supply route, by the end of this month.

The warning comes as more than 1,000 goods-laden trucks and fuel carriers remain stranded along various stretches of NH-37, extending from Assam into Manipur's Jiribam district, following heavy rains and landslides that have severely disrupted transportation.

With National Highway-2, which connects Imphal with Dimapur in Nagaland, remaining closed since mid-May, NH-37 has emerged as Manipur's primary lifeline for the movement of essential commodities, fuel and other supplies from Assam.

However, persistent rainfall and repeated landslides have triggered large-scale mudslides and



road damage along the highway, leaving hundreds of vehicles,

including LPG tankers and fuel trucks, unable to reach the state capital.

The Drivers' Union has held both the Manipur government and the National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited (NHIDCL) responsible for the deteriorating condition of the highway, alleging that the road infrastructure has seen little meaningful improvement over the decades.

Union General Secretary Maimom Anil Meitei said the current arrangement of security-escorted convoys is insufficient to meet the state's transportation requirements. According to the union, only around 150 vehicles are being allowed to move daily under security cover, resulting in supply bottlenecks and rising prices of essential commodities across the state.

The union has demanded the formation of a dedicated monitoring committee to oversee road maintenance and restoration work being undertaken by NHID-

CL and ensure accountability in the execution of repair projects.

It warned that if visible progress is not achieved by June 30, drivers across the state-including those operating vehicles under security escort-will cease operations indefinitely from July 1.

The proposed strike is expected to further disrupt the supply of food, fuel and other essential goods to Manipur, which has already been grappling with logistical challenges due to highway blockages and adverse weather conditions.

Union leaders said the agitation is aimed at compelling authorities to take immediate and effective measures to restore normal transportation, ease supply shortages and prevent further escalation of prices in the state.

The development has raised concerns over the availability of essential commodities in Manipur, with traders and consumers closely monitoring the government's response to the transport workers' demands.

Nagaland CM Rio Pushes for Stricter ILP Enforcement to Safeguard Indigenous Naga Identity



KOHIMA

Nagaland Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio has called for stronger enforcement of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system and renewed collective efforts to protect the indigenous identity of the Naga people, stressing the importance of constitutional safeguards and community participation. Addressing a gathering after inaugurating the Kohima Village Multipurpose Building on Friday, Rio said the preservation of Naga customs, traditions and governance structures remains a priority for the state. He noted that constitutional protections under Article 371A and the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation (BEFR), 1873, have played a crucial role in safeguarding the unique identity and cultural heritage of Nagaland. The chief minister emphasized that these special provisions must continue to be upheld to ensure the protection of Naga customary laws and traditional institutions.

Highlighting the role of village councils, Rio said they remain the only competent authorities empowered to certify whether an individual is indigenous to a particular village. While acknowledging that non-locals are legally permitted to live and work in Nagaland, he asserted that such residents cannot be granted indigenous status.

To strengthen implementation of the ILP regime, Rio urged village councils, landlords, employers, educational institutions and community organisations to maintain proper records and documentation of non-local residents. He said greater vigilance was necessary

to prevent misuse of indigenous certificates and to preserve the integrity of the state's protective mechanisms.

The chief minister also appealed for public cooperation in the upcoming 2027 Census, describing accurate population data as essential for development planning and fair allocation of resources.

Referring to previous census exercises, Rio expressed concern over inflated population figures, stating that inaccurate data had adversely affected planning in key sectors, including education, welfare and infrastructure development. He urged churches, civil society groups, village councils and citizens to work together to ensure that census figures accurately reflect the state's actual population.

Defending Nagaland's traditional system of village governance, Rio said village councils should continue functioning through consensus and selection rather than electoral contests. According to him, the customary system has historically fostered unity and social harmony, while elections at the village level could create divisions within communities.

Speaking on the newly inaugurated Kohima Village Multipurpose Building, the chief minister described the facility as a symbol of unity, cooperation and brotherhood among the Naga people. He said the building would serve as a common venue for cultural, social and community activities, benefiting not only residents of Kohima Village but people from across the state.

Rio commended the Kohima Village Council for successfully executing the project with support from both the central and state governments. He also announced additional financial assistance to equip the facility with furniture, sound systems and other necessary infrastructure.

Manipur Mourns Passing of Primrose Raikhan, State's First Woman IFS Officer

IMPHAL



Manipur's first woman to join the Indian Foreign Service (IFS), Primrose Raikhan Sharma, passed away on June 25, prompting tributes from across the state for her pioneering contributions to Indian diplomacy and public service.

Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh expressed deep sorrow over her demise, describing her as a distinguished daughter of Manipur whose achievements brought pride to the state and inspiration to generations of young people. In a message posted on X, the chief minister said Primrose Raikhan's exemplary service to the nation and her accomplishments in the diplomatic arena would be remembered with admiration and respect.

"On behalf of the people of Manipur, I extend my heartfelt condolences to her bereaved family and loved ones. May her noble soul rest in eternal peace. Om Shanti," Singh said.

A native of Talui village in Ukhrul district, Primrose Raikhan broke new ground by becoming the first woman from Manipur to enter the prestigious Indian Foreign Service. During her distinguished diplomatic career, she served in several capacities and later represented India as Ambassador to Portugal. She was the daughter of Lt. Mazachang Raikhan, a pioneering civil servant who was the first officer from Manipur to join the Indian Railway Service. Following his retirement, he went on to serve as Chairman of the Manipur Public Service Commission.

SILCHAR SPA RAID: Two Parlour Owners Arrested, 26 Women Detained for Verification



SILCHAR

Police in Assam's Silchar town have arrested two spa-cum-beauty parlour owners and detained 26 women following raids on two establishments allegedly involved in illegal activities.

The operation was carried out on Thursday after police received specific intelligence inputs regarding suspected unlawful activities at certain spa centres operating in the town. The raids targeted Lovely Spa Centre and Lotus Spa Centre, both located inside the Imperial Shopping Mall, bringing renewed attention to the rapid growth of spa businesses in Silchar.

Addressing reporters on Friday, Additional Superintendent of Police (Crime) Rajat Pal said the action was based on credible information indicating that illegal trade was being conducted from the premises.

"The 26 women detained during the raids have been brought to Silchar Sadar Police Station for questioning and verification," Pal said.

Police arrested the owners of the two establishments, identified

as Puja Das and Hira Debnath. A case has been registered at Silchar Sadar Police Station under Case No. 584/2026.

The case has been filed under Sections 318(4), 296, 132, 270 and 112(2) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), along with Sections 3, 4, 7 and 8 of the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA).

According to police, several objectionable items were recovered during the raids. However, officials declined to disclose details of the seized materials, stating that they form part of the evidence being examined as part of the ongoing investigation.

"We have recovered some objectionable items from the spas. The investigation is underway," Pal said.

Investigators are currently verifying the identities and roles of the detained women to determine whether they were employees, customers, or possible victims of trafficking and exploitation. Police officials emphasised that no conclusions would be drawn until the verification process is completed and statements from those detained are recorded.

Pal also advised residents to exercise caution while visiting spa and wellness centres, urging customers to ensure that such establishments possess valid licences and operate within the legal framework.

The crackdown has sparked discussion over the increasing number of spa centres operating in Silchar and allegations that some establishments may be misused for unlawful activities. Police said further action would depend on the findings of the ongoing investigation.

Silchar Youth Held at Imphal Airport for Alleged Rs 19 Lakh Sextortion of Woman

IMPHAL

The Cyber Crime Police Station in Manipur has arrested a 23-year-old man from Assam for allegedly extorting nearly Rs 19 lakh from a woman by threatening to circulate a private video recorded without her knowledge. The accused, identified as Roshan Singh, a resident of Malugram village in Cachar district of Assam, was apprehended at the entrance of Imphal Airport on June 25 at around 5:45 pm following a cybercrime investigation. Police said Singh was produced before the Chief Judicial Magistrate, Imphal West, on June 26 and was subsequently remanded to police custody for further interrogation. According to submissions made by the Assistant Public Prosecutor before the court, the victim first came into contact with the accused in September 2018 through a mutual acquaintance. At the time, Singh allegedly introduced himself as a resident of Kumbi Bazar Awang Leikai in Manipur, concealing his actual identity.

The victim, who was then employed as a nurse in Kolkata, remained in contact with him over

the years. During this period, the accused allegedly sought financial assistance on multiple occasions, claiming that his father had died and that he was struggling with mounting hospital expenses.

Investigators said the accused continued to exploit the victim's trust by fabricating personal emergencies and repeatedly requesting money. In 2024, Singh allegedly promised to marry the woman and persuaded her to meet him in Guwahati. Acting on the assurance, the victim resigned from her job in Bengaluru and travelled to Guwahati, where the two met at the airport and stayed at a hotel in the Paltan Bazar area before travelling to Imphal. After returning to Assam, the accused allegedly resumed requesting money, citing the medical treatment of his mother and sister as the reason. The victim reportedly continued sending funds.

The case took a more serious turn in February 2025 when Singh allegedly sent the victim a video clip secretly recorded during their stay in Guwahati and threatened to share it with her family members unless she paid additional amounts.



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PUNJAB 2027

As India moves toward another cycle of crucial state elections in 2027, Punjab is emerging as one of the most politically significant battlegrounds. For the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has spent the past decade expanding its reach into regions once considered electorally inaccessible, Punjab represents both an opportunity and a challenge. Yet, unlike many other states where political experimentation has yielded electoral gains, Punjab demands a far more cautious and responsible approach.

Since 2014, the BJP has pursued an aggressive strategy of geographical expansion. States where the party once had minimal presence have gradually become part of its electoral map. The party's leadership under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah has consistently sought to transform regional contests into national political projects. Successes in several states have reinforced this approach, even as setbacks in others have highlighted its limitations.

Punjab, however, is not merely another state waiting to be added to an electoral checklist. The state's political, social, and historical realities are unique. It has endured periods of violence, separatist insurgency, and deep social trauma. The return of peace and stability came at an enormous cost, paid by ordinary citizens, security personnel, and political leaders alike. Any political strategy that ignores these sensitivities risks reopening wounds that took decades to heal. This is why the approaching Assembly election must be viewed not simply through the prism of political competition but through the larger lens of democratic responsibility.

The BJP's ambitions in Punjab are no secret. Since the breakdown of its long-standing alliance with the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), the party has been attempting to establish itself as an independent force in the state. Yet electoral realities have repeatedly demonstrated the difficulties involved.

The party's experiments with high-profile candidates illustrate the challenge. Former Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley lost from Amritsar in 2014 despite his national stature. Five years later, diplomat-turned-politician Hardeep Singh Puri met a similar fate. In 2024, former ambassador Taranjit Singh Sandhu was unable to reverse the trend. These defeats revealed a fundamental political truth: national prominence cannot substitute for grassroots credibility.

Punjab's electorate has traditionally valued local leadership, regional concerns, and community connect over political symbolism. Attempts to parachute prominent personalities into the state's electoral arena have largely failed to resonate with voters.

Equally significant has been the BJP's strategy of recruiting leaders from rival parties. Across India, political defections have become an increasingly common tool of electoral expansion. Punjab has witnessed this trend as well, with several former Congress, Akali Dal, and Aam Aadmi Party leaders joining the BJP.

The induction of former Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh was initially projected as a major breakthrough. Yet his influence appears to have diminished considerably over time. Similarly, the elevation of Ravneet Singh Bittu to national prominence has not translated into a broader political shift on the ground. Instead of strengthening the party's local roots, such moves have often reinforced perceptions that the BJP lacks an organic leadership structure within the state. This raises an important question: can electoral growth in Punjab be achieved through political imports alone?

The answer appears increasingly doubtful. Punjab's voters are confronting far more pressing concerns. The state's economy is under severe strain. Public debt continues to mount. Agricultural distress remains a persistent challenge despite repeated assurances of reform and support. The drug menace continues to cast a long shadow over society, particularly among the youth. Unemployment has fuelled frustration and migration aspirations among thousands of young Punjabis.

These are the issues that deserve centre stage during the election campaign. Unfortunately, modern electoral politics often prioritises narratives, perceptions, and political engineering over substantive policy debates. Punjab can ill afford such distractions. The state's future depends not on political spectacle but on credible solutions to its economic and social challenges.

The BJP's declaration that it intends to contest all 117 Assembly seats independently reflects its confidence and long-term ambitions. Every political party has the right to expand its base and seek power through democratic means. There is nothing unusual about that aspiration. What matters is the method employed to achieve it. Punjab should not become a laboratory for excessive political experimentation.

The state's strategic significance extends beyond electoral arithmetic. Sharing an international border with Pakistan, Punjab occupies a critical position in India's national security architecture. Political instability in the state has implications that extend far beyond its boundaries. History has repeatedly demonstrated how domestic unrest can be exploited by external forces seeking to undermine India's security interests.

Therefore, all political actors—whether ruling at the Centre or competing in the state—must exercise restraint and responsibility. The BJP, in particular, often emphasises nationalism and national security as central pillars of its political philosophy. If those principles are to retain credibility, they must guide electoral conduct as well. Electoral gains should never come at the cost of social harmony, institutional credibility, or democratic trust.

At the same time, Punjab's political landscape remains unusually fragmented.

The ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), led by Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann, faces the difficult task of defending its record while battling anti-incumbency pressures. The Congress seeks to reclaim ground lost in recent years and restore its traditional position in the state's politics. The Shiromani Akali Dal is fighting for political relevance after a prolonged period of decline. The BJP, meanwhile, hopes to emerge as a major independent force.

Such a multi-cornered contest has the potential to produce unpredictable outcomes.

Yet unpredictability is not necessarily unhealthy for democracy. In fact, competitive elections strengthen democratic accountability. The real danger emerges when political contests become exercises in manipulation rather than persuasion. Punjab's electorate has consistently demonstrated political maturity. Voters have repeatedly shown their willingness to reward performance, punish complacency, and reject political assumptions. There is little reason to believe that this tradition will change in 2027. Political parties should focus on presenting coherent visions for economic revival, agricultural sustainability, youth employment, social harmony, and governance reform. Voters deserve meaningful debates on these issues rather than attempts at polarisation or manufactured narratives. Punjab's rich cultural heritage, diverse social fabric, and hard-earned stability are too valuable to be sacrificed at the altar of electoral ambition. As the campaign season gradually gathers momentum, every stakeholder would do well to remember a simple principle: democracy functions best when elections are decided by the free will of the people, not by the sophistication of political manoeuvres.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

“People are capable, at any time in their lives, of doing what they dream of.” - Paulo Coelho

DEAD IN LAW, ALIVE IN POLITICS



PUSHP SARAF

What does it say when a ruling party and its rivals train their fire on a third outfit they have already outlawed altogether - one whose leaders and senior workers are either behind bars or in exile? Ordinarily, this would be a textbook case of flogging a dead horse.

Reality can be stranger. In Bangladesh, the Awami League (AL), long the country's pre-eminent political force, had its activities banned on May 10-12 2025 under the Anti-Terrorism Act. The proscription followed the ouster of its leader, former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who was driven into exile on August 5, 2024.

And yet, on 23 June 2026, the party's 77th founding anniversary, the entire state machinery was once again mobilised against the AL.

The army and the Border Guard, a paramilitary force, were deployed across six districts. Police armoured vehicles took up position, mostly pointedly outside the historic Dhanmondi 32 residence of the late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Father of the Nation and the face most identified with the party. Armed forces officers were granted special executive-magistracy powers to dispense justice on the spot - arresting offenders, dispersing unlawful assemblies, conducting searches and taking preventive measures to keep order. In effect, it amounted to a second ban on an already banned party, designed to pre-empt any celebration.

Dozens of party workers were rounded up as they tried to mark the day, in some cases simply by cutting cakes. No disorder was reported. In short, the security forces appeared to have denied the

AL any chance of turning the anniversary to its advantage. They had been directed to keep the pressure on till June 30. The political class joined in. The ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the opposition Jamaat-e-Islami (BJI) and the National Citizens Party (NCP) all took to the streets to hound AL activists. The BNP told its leaders and cadres to stay vigilant, hold their localities, organise rallies and sit-ins, take out processions and alert the security forces to any “evil activity” or conspiracy by the AL. Home Minister Salahuddin Ahmed branded the party a “mafia group” and confirmed that the BNP and its associated bodies had been instructed accordingly. The BJI-led alliance, for its part, held a rally denouncing the enforced disappearance and killings of the AL years.

What does all this underline, if not the enduring importance of the AL? The party built its identity on a secular, regionally cooperative and development-oriented agenda, and on close ties with India. The scale of the security operation is itself the clearest proof that it remains a major factor in national politics. Evidently, more than a year of efforts to silence it have not yet succeeded.

Whatever conciliatory words Prime Minister Tarique Rahman offered in Kuala Lumpur days before the anniversary were plainly not meant for the AL. Addressing Bangladeshi expatriates in Malaysia, he declared that he would not use state power to avenge the suffering he and his family endured during years in opposition. During the AL's tenure, Tarique lived in exile while his mother, former Prime Minister Khaleida Zia, struggled with the ill health that ultimately led to her death. As he put it: “Now, at this very moment, BNP is

in charge of running the country. I am the Prime Minister. If I want, I can take revenge out of personal anger. But if I do that, can you tell me what the benefit would be? There would be no benefit.”

However, while Tarique himself has neither formally banned the AL nor explicitly sought to bar it from political life, he has done little to unwind the harsh measures inherited from the interim government that preceded him. The party's senior leadership remains in exile or in custody, facing prosecution on charges ranging from corruption to murder. Hasina herself was sentenced to death in absentia by the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) in Dhaka on November 17, 2025, after being found guilty of crimes against humanity and incitement to murder. She has dismissed the tribunal as a “kangaroo court” and denounced the proceedings as politically motivated.

Neither Tarique nor the BNP has shown any inclination to soften the pressure on Hasina or the AL. Indeed, the BNP has benefited politically from the party's marginalisation, securing victory in the February 2026 general election in the absence of its principal rival. Nor is the AL likely to find sympathy among the other major political forces. Both the BJI and the NCP, now prominent actors in the political landscape, remain deeply critical of the AL and its leadership. NCP convener Nahid Islam ruled out the AL's return to politics in Bangladesh, describing it as a “fascist, genocidal and terrorist organisation”.

The hostility between the BJI and the AL is rooted in longstanding ideological differences over the religious and political character of the Bangladeshi state. Their occasional alliances in the 1990s were driven more by political expediency than by shared principles. They had first joined hands against President Hussain Muhammad Ershad's military-backed regime and later in the campaign that helped unseat the BNP in 1996. Ironically, the BNP itself had once stood alongside the AL in the broader opposition movement against Ershad.

For now, however, those historical alignments appear largely irrelevant. Bangladesh's political landscape has been reshaped by the dramatic fall of the AL, leaving old rivalries, alliances, and ironies overshadowed by a new and deeply polarised reality.

To the AL's credit, battered and bruised though it may be, the party remains determined to fight on. Its greatest asset is its formidable record in the nation's political life. The party proudly describes itself as the driving force behind every major democratic milestone in Bangladesh's history, from the Language Movement of 1952 and the Six-Point Movement of 1966 to the mass uprising of 1969 and, ultimately, the Liberation War of 1971 under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Few would deny its claim to having played a decisive role in transforming Bangladesh from an aid-dependent country into one of South Asia's most dynamic economies during Hasina's tenure.

The party characterises the campaign against it as a calculated exercise in vengeance that belies official claims of democratic restoration. Deprived of

the guidance of many of its imprisoned or exiled leaders, its rank and file nevertheless continues to organise sporadic displays of defiance. In the first half of June alone, activists of the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), its student wing, staged a procession on the Dhaka-Chattogram Highway, leading to the arrest of 45 participants. Around the same time, more than a hundred BCL members reportedly gathered for a meeting and torchlight procession in Chattogram, prompting authorities to file cases against dozens of them on allegations of subversive activities. Earlier, AL activists and members of affiliated organisations used the funeral procession of veteran leader and freedom fighter Tofail Ahmed in Dhaka to raise slogans such as “Joy Bangla, Joy Bangabandhu” and “Tofail Bhai, Bhoynai, Rajpoto Chhari Nai” (brother Tofail, there is no fear. We have not aban-

DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

A proud and historic moment for Nagaland as Guru Sangyusang Pongener received the prestigious Padma Shri from President Droupadi Murmu Ji.

This well-deserved recognition honours his lifelong dedication to preserving, promoting, and passing on the rich heritage of Ao-Naga folk arts, culture, and traditions to future generations. His invaluable contributions have not only safeguarded our cultural identity but have also brought the vibrant traditions of Nagaland to the national stage.

On behalf of the people of Nagaland, I extend my heartfelt congratulations to Guru Sangyusang Pongener on this remarkable achievement.

I also express my sincere gratitude to Hon'ble Prime Minister @narendramodi Ji and the Government of India for conferring this prestigious honour and recognizing the rich cultural heritage of our state. @rashtrapatibhvn

~ Benjamin Yephthomi, State President, BJP, Nagaland



doned the streets), resulting in further detentions.

The AL's enduring imprint on Bangladesh's political consciousness is evident even in the language of its opponents. Its name remains the benchmark against which political rivals are measured. BJI chief and Leader of the Opposition Shafiqur Rahman, for instance, has repeatedly taunted the BNP by accusing it of following the path of the AL without possessing either its organisational strength or political stature. “We were once oppressed together, but with due respect,” he remarked, “no matter how hard you try, you cannot become that Awami League; you can only become a ‘weakened version’ of it.”

That may be the central conundrum of contemporary Bangladesh politics. The AL has been driven from power, its leadership dispersed, imprisoned or exiled, and its future clouded by legal and political uncertainty. Nevertheless it continues to dominate the national conversation. Whether as a target of prosecution, a symbol of resistance, or a reference point for allies and adversaries alike, the party remains impossible to ignore. The struggle over Bangladesh's political future is, in many ways, still being defined by the question of what place the AL will ultimately occupy within it.



Tripura Doctors Oppose Private Practice Ban, Urge Government to Reconsider Policy

AGARTALA

A forum representing super-specialist doctors at Tripura's premier government healthcare institution has opposed the state government's decision to prohibit private practice by faculty members and medical officers, describing the move as unilateral and lacking adequate consultation with stakeholders.

In a letter addressed to Bidhan Goswami, the Superspecialty Doctors' Forum of Agartala Government Medical College and Govind Ballabh Pant Hospital expressed strong reservations about the proposed reform.

The forum stated that the policy had been formulated and announced without meaningful engagement with doctors directly involved in patient care and warned that banning private practice alone would



not lead to better healthcare outcomes.

According to the letter, improving healthcare services requires addressing longstanding challenges, including shortages of medical personnel, inadequate infrastructure, limitations in intensive care

units and operation theatres, lack of support staff, and insufficient opportunities for promotions and incentives.

The doctors also pointed out that many of them joined government service when no restrictions on private practice existed.

They argued that changing service conditions without consultation undermines the understanding under which they accepted their positions and contributed to expanding super-specialty healthcare services in the state.

The forum further criticised remarks suggesting that doctors unwilling to comply with the policy should resign, calling such statements "demeaning and disrespectful" to the medical profession.

Instead of imposing a blanket prohibition, the association proposed an "opt-in rather than opt-out" model that would allow doctors a choice before the policy is implemented.

The controversy follows the Tripura government's recent decision to ban private practice by faculty members and medical officers at AGMC and GB Pant Hospital. The policy, approved by the state

cabinet, aims to improve doctors' availability in public hospitals and strengthen healthcare delivery. To compensate affected doctors, the government has announced a special allowance equivalent to 20 per cent of their salary.

Defending the move, Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha said the measure was intended to enhance public healthcare services and ensure greater accessibility to specialist doctors in government facilities. The proposal, however, has drawn criticism from opposition leaders.

Leader of Opposition Jitendra Chaudhury warned that healthcare services could suffer if experienced doctors choose to leave government service as a result of the restrictions.

He argued that attracting specialist doctors from outside the state would be difficult and urged the government to

adopt a balanced approach that improves healthcare delivery without alienating medical professionals.

Former Tripura health minister and Congress MLA Sudip Roy Barman also criticised the decision, describing it as unrealistic and rushed.

Barman cautioned that the move could adversely affect patients across the state and argued that professionals should not be compelled to remain engaged in official duties beyond regular working hours. He called on the government to review and reconsider the policy before implementation.

The debate has highlighted growing concerns over balancing public healthcare requirements with the professional autonomy and service conditions of government doctors, as the state prepares to roll out the new policy.

Class 11 Student Creates Zubeen Garg Portrait Using Lyrics of Nearly 1,000 Songs



KRC TIMES NEWS DESK

UDALGURI: A Class 11 student from Assam has created a unique portrait of legendary Assamese singer Zubeen Garg using the lyrics of nearly 1,000 songs performed by the music icon.

The artwork was created by Hrishikesh Saikia, a resident of Tangla in Assam's Udalguri district. The young artist said the portrait is a tribute to Zubeen Garg, whose music has inspired generations of listeners across the state and beyond.

Instead of conventional sketching techniques, Hrishikesh meticulously used the lyrics of almost 1,000 songs sung by Zubeen Garg to form the singer's likeness, blending typography with portrait art. The intricate work reflects both his artistic talent and deep admiration for the celebrated musician.

The portrait has drawn praise for its originality, attention to detail, and emotional appeal. Many have appreciated the effort as a fitting tribute to the singer, who is fondly known as "Pranor Xilpi" by his fans.

The artwork stands as a testament to the enduring influence of Zubeen Garg's music and the creative ways in which young admirers continue to celebrate his legacy.

Assam's Capital Spending Surges to Rs 26,000 Crore in a Decade: Himanta Biswa Sarma

GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Friday said the state's annual capital expenditure has increased more than thirteen-fold over the past decade, rising from Rs 2,000 crore in 2014-15 to Rs 26,000 crore in 2025-26.

Sharing the figures on social media platform X, the Chief Minister highlighted the growth in public investment as a key driver of Assam's infrastructure expansion and economic development.

According to Sarma, the increase in capital expenditure has enabled the creation of critical public infrastructure across the state, including schools, hospitals, roads and bridges, while also generating new opportunities for economic growth.

"Every rupee invested has contributed to building infrastructure and improving public services across Assam," the Chief Minister stated, underscoring the government's emphasis on development-led governance.

The Chief Minister said the substantial rise in capital spending

reflects the state government's commitment to infrastructure-driven growth, which he described as central to accelerating economic progress and enhancing service delivery.

He further linked the increase in public investment to the government's broader vision of a "Viksit Assam," aimed at transforming the state through sustained expenditure on development projects and expansion of key infrastructure sectors.

The announcement comes as the Assam government continues to prioritise investments in transport connectivity, healthcare, education, urban development and other public infrastructure projects as part of its long-term growth strategy.

State officials have maintained that higher capital expenditure has played a significant role in improving physical infrastructure and supporting economic activity, with the government positioning infrastructure development as a cornerstone of its development agenda for the coming years.

Assam to Mandate Driving Tests, End Cross-District Licence Applications Under New SOP

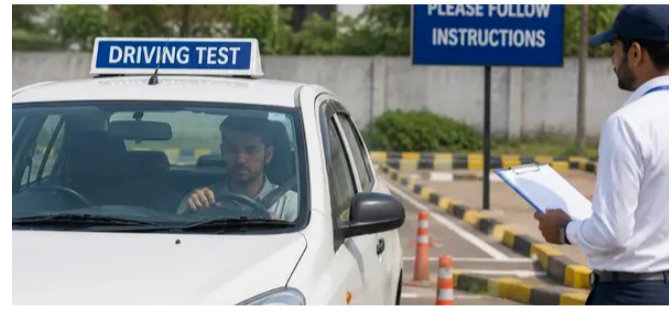
GUWAHATI

The Assam government is set to introduce a new Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) aimed at tightening the process of issuing driving licences, making driving tests compulsory for all applicants and restricting licence applications to their home districts.

Announcing the move during a visit to the District Transport Office (DTO) in Guwahati on Friday, Assam Transport Minister Charan Boro said the reforms are intended to address irregularities in licence issuance and improve road safety across the state.

The minister said the Transport Department has received multiple complaints alleging that driving licences were being issued without applicants appearing for mandatory driving tests.

"There have been allegations that some individuals obtain licences without taking driving tests, while others reportedly secure licences from districts where they do not reside. The new SOP



will ensure that every applicant undergoes a driving test before a licence is issued," Boro said.

Under the proposed guidelines, the physical presence of applicants during driving tests will be mandatory, and individuals will no longer be allowed to apply for driving licences outside their home districts.

The minister linked the reforms to rising concerns over road safety, noting that despite various initiatives, road accidents continue to claim a significant number of lives across Assam.

"We are taking the matter seri-

ously because of increasing complaints and the growing incidence of road accidents. It is essential that only trained and skilled drivers are allowed on the roads," he said.

Boro also highlighted the lack of adequate driving test infrastructure in several District Transport Offices and announced plans to establish dedicated driving test tracks in every DTO across the state.

"If not this year, then by next year every DTO office will have a dedicated driving test track. I have taken personal responsibility for

this. Once these facilities are in place, we can ensure that only qualified drivers receive licences," he said.

The minister added that he would personally inspect DTOs across Assam to assess infrastructure requirements and monitor the implementation of the proposed reforms.

The move comes against the backdrop of persistent road safety concerns in the state. According to Transport Department data, Assam recorded 4,219 road accidents and 1,008 fatalities between January and March 2026. During the corresponding period in 2025, the state reported 4,232 accidents and 1,035 deaths.

Although the figures indicate a marginal decline, officials say the numbers remain alarming.

Nine districts - Kamrup, Guwahati, Nagaon, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Golaghat, Barpeta, Dhubri and Hojai - accounted for nearly half of all road accident fatalities in the state during the first quarter of the year.

Assam Cracks Down on Fake Medical Practitioners, 62 Arrested Since 2025: CM Himanta Biswa Sarma

GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Friday said that 62 fake doctors have been arrested across the state since 2025 as part of an intensified government campaign to curb fraudulent medical practices and protect public health.

Sharing details of the ongoing crackdown, the chief minister said authorities have registered 59 cases against individuals allegedly practising medicine without valid qualifications or professional registration.

In a post on social media platform X, Sarma said the government remains committed to eliminating activities that endanger public welfare and undermine essential institutions.

"We're committed to weed out all forms of evil from our society. After an extensive crackdown on the drug syndicate and child mar-



riage offenders, we're on a mission to crack down on quack doctors to ensure the sanctity of our healthcare system and protect patients," he stated.

An infographic released by the chief minister's office indicated that 59 criminal cases have been filed and 62 alleged quack doctors arrested

under the statewide drive launched against fake medical practitioners.

The Assam government has intensified enforcement measures over the past year, with raids and legal action carried out in multiple districts against individuals accused of offering medical treatment with-

out recognised qualifications.

Officials said the campaign is aimed at preventing fraudulent healthcare practices, protecting patients from unsafe treatment and maintaining professional standards within the state's healthcare system.

The crackdown forms part of a broader law-enforcement initiative undertaken by the state government in recent years, which has also targeted drug trafficking networks and child marriage offenders.

Authorities have urged citizens to seek treatment only from qualified and registered medical professionals and to report suspicious medical practices to local health and law-enforcement agencies.

The state government has maintained that strict action against unqualified practitioners is necessary to ensure patient safety and strengthen public confidence in the healthcare system.

NEEPCO Rules Out Dam Operations in Arunachal Flash Flood, Blames Localised Heavy Rainfall



ITANAGAR

The North Eastern Electric Power Corporation (NEEPCO) has stated that the flash flood which devastated the residential colony of the Panyor Lower Hydroelectric Power Station in Arunachal Pradesh's Keyi Panyor district was triggered by intense localised rainfall and had no connection with the operation of the project's reservoir or powerhouse.

Quest!

Earth has lost 50% of its wildlife in the past 40 years.

In a press release issued on June 26, the public sector undertaking said the disaster struck the project colony at around 6:30 am on June 24 following several hours of exceptionally heavy rainfall over a limited catchment area surrounding the hydropower station.

According to NEEPCO, rainfall began at approximately 3:00 am, causing two small streams flowing near the administrative complex and dam site colony to swell rapidly and overflow. The sudden surge of water swept away 24 residential buildings and caused extensive damage to several other structures within the colony.

The flash flood claimed one life, while four people remain missing. Search and rescue operations are continuing with the involvement of the



district administration, the State Disaster Response Force (SDRF), and the Indian Air Force.

Authorities launched emergency relief and rescue measures immediately after the incident. The Arunachal Pradesh government, in coordination

with NEEPCO, has been assisting affected families and facilitating medical evacuation, including the airlifting of injured persons from the disaster-hit area.

NEEPCO said preliminary findings indicate that the flood was caused by highly localised heavy rainfall rather than any sudden increase in river discharge from upstream areas.

The corporation noted that its Early Warning System (EWS), which monitors rainfall patterns and reservoir inflows, did not register any abnormal rainfall levels across the broader catchment area or unusual inflows into the reservoir during the period leading up to the incident.

Based on the initial assessment, the company concluded that the flooding originated from overflowing local streams and not from reservoir releases or hydropower operations.

The PSU also clarified that no downstream regions were affected by the incident and reiterated that the flash flood was unrelated to the functioning of either the reservoir or the powerhouse.

The clarification comes amid concerns and speculation regarding the possible role of hydropower infrastructure in the disaster. NEEPCO maintained that all project operations remained normal and that the tragedy was the result of an extreme weather event concentrated over a small geographical area.

Meanwhile, rescue teams continue efforts to locate the missing persons as authorities assess the full extent of damage caused by the flash flood.

Tripura Forms High-Level Panel to Probe Deadly Agartala Blast, CM Cites Suspected Gas Leak



AGARTALA

gas leak from the piped gas connection.

He said Chowdhury was at his workplace and performing prayers with incense sticks when the explosion occurred, adding that the incident may have been triggered by the gas leakage.

After visiting the blast site on Friday, Chief Minister Saha described the incident as tragic and expressed condolences to the bereaved family. He also assured compensation for those affected.

The Chief Minister said preliminary investigations suggest that a gas pipeline connected to the building may have been left open, leading to the accumulation of gas inside the premises. The gas is believed to have ignited when the victim lit an incense stick, resulting in the explosion.

Saha noted that Chowdhury had sustained nearly 90 per cent burn injuries before succumbing during treatment.

While referring to possible negligence by Tripura Natural Gas Company Limited (TNGCL) in the initial stages of the probe, the Chief Minister stressed that a detailed investigation is underway and that responsibility would be fixed based on the findings.

He assured that strict action would be taken against anyone found accountable for the incident once the inquiry report is submitted.

The Tripura government has ordered a high-level inquiry into the explosion at a multi-storey apartment building in Agartala that claimed one life, with Chief Minister Manik Saha indicating that preliminary findings point to possible negligence in a piped gas connection.

The explosion occurred around 12:30 pm on June 25 at an apartment building on Ramnagar Road No. 4 in Agartala. The victim, Subhrajit Chowdhury, suffered severe burn injuries and died while undergoing treatment at Govind Ballabh Pant Hospital on Friday.

According to an order issued by the Urban Development Department, the inquiry committee will be headed by the department's secretary and will include the Director of Fire and Emergency Services, the Municipal Commissioner of the Agartala Municipal Corporation, the Superintendent of Police of West Tripura district, and the Chief Engineer of the Public Works Department (Buildings).

The panel has been directed to submit its findings within seven days. The order was issued by Tamlaj Majumdar.

Speaking to reporters, the victim's wife, Reshmi Saha, alleged that her husband had previously informed her about a suspected

Sonia Gandhi says Centre's 'stony silence' on Gaza has hurt India's strategic interests

NEW DELHI

Congress Parliamentary Party chairperson Sonia Gandhi on Saturday sharply criticised the Modi government over its response to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, alleging that its "stony silence" and inaction had undermined both India's moral standing and strategic interests.

In an opinion article published in a leading national daily, Gandhi argued that India's current foreign policy had alienated the country from its traditional partners in Palestine, Iran and the wider Middle East, while allowing Pakistan to project itself as a mediator in the region.

She also described Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel shortly before the US-Israel joint attack on Iran as a "bewildering strategic decision". Gandhi contended that India had a moral obligation to speak out against the humanitarian situation in Gaza and the occupied West Bank, while its national interest also demanded a response in line with growing international criticism of Israel's military campaign. "The Modi government's continued silence simply cannot be explained rationally or morally," she said.

Citing findings of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Gandhi said the body had concluded in September 2025 that Israeli authorities were committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. She added that a June 2026 report by the same commission, now headed by retired Justice S. Muralidhar, reiterated that Israeli actions were intended to destroy the Palestinian population in Gaza by targeting children.

Referring to the commission's report, Gandhi said it documented extensive destruction in Gaza and alleged gen-

ocidal intent behind Israel's military actions. She cited figures from the report claiming that at least 20,000 children had been killed and another 44,000 injured, many with life-altering wounds. She also referred to findings that schools and healthcare infrastructure, including paediatric hospitals, had been devastated.

While describing Hamas' October 2023 attack on Israel as "dastardly, horrific, and absolutely unacceptable", Gandhi argued that Israel's subsequent military response had been marked by "wanton cruelty and barbarity". She also cited statements by senior Israeli leaders, saying they reflected what she described as genocidal intent.

Gandhi further alleged that continued support from US President Donald Trump's administration had enabled Israel to pursue its military campaign, while American opposition had prevented the United Nations from taking stronger action. At the same time, she said UN agencies had played an important role in documenting alleged Israeli war crimes.

She argued that the international mood had shifted significantly, pointing to what she said were moves by countries including France, the UK, Canada and Australia to recognise Palestinian statehood, South Africa's case against Israel before the International Court of Justice, restrictions on arms sales imposed by several European countries, diplomatic measures taken by Latin American nations and arrest warrants issued by the International Criminal Court against Israeli leaders.

According to Gandhi, India had increasingly found itself isolated as many of its close partners had taken a more critical position on Israel's actions in Gaza.

She also criticised the Centre for not responding to the

latest UN commission report headed by Justice Muralidhar, adding that his transfer from the Delhi High Court after his remarks on police inaction during the 2020 Delhi riots made the government's silence unsurprising.

Arguing that India had historically championed post-colonial solidarity, national sovereignty and international peace, Gandhi said the country's present position marked a departure from that legacy.

She also referred to the death of five-year-old Hind Rajab, who was killed after her family's vehicle came under Israeli fire in Gaza, describing the incident as emblematic of the suffering of Palestinian civilians.

"The Modi government's silence and inaction are not just morally reprehensible but also inexplicable from a national interest perspective," Gandhi said.

She further argued that India was moving closer to Israel at a time when much of the international community was distancing itself from the country.

"We have alienated ourselves from our historical allies in Palestine, Iran, and the larger Middle East. We have distanced ourselves from global public opinion. And we have let Pakistan... swoop in to claim the space of a mediator," she said.

Gandhi concluded that India had sacrificed both its strategic interests and moral standing without securing any tangible diplomatic gains beyond Prime Minister Modi's close ties with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge later shared Gandhi's article on X, calling it "a stark reminder of how our current foreign policy has alienated our historical allies in Palestine, Iran, and the larger Middle East".

'Amra Beiman Noi': Team Mamata reframes July 21 Martyrs' Day rally as loyalty test amid TMC split

KOLKATA

For years, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) marked July 21 as 'Shahid Diwas' (Martyrs' Day) with a display of political dominance that few rivals in West Bengal could match. The rally in Kolkata's Dharmatala neighbourhood drew vast crowds, showcased defections from opposition parties and often served as a stage for Mamata Banerjee, the party's founder, to sketch the contours of the next political battle.

This year, party leaders and political observers say, the rally is taking on a more defensive purpose: demonstrating that the organisation still exists as a coherent force after a rebellion that has torn through its ranks.

TMC, founded in 1998 after Banerjee broke away from the Congress party, is facing what many within the organisation describe as the gravest crisis in its history. After losing power in West Bengal, it has watched a stream of MPs, MLAs and senior leaders defect to a rival faction led by the state's opposition leader, Ritabrata Banerjee.

In response, the faction led by Mamata and her nephew Abhishek Banerjee has adopted a new slogan ahead of the annual gathering: 'Amra Beiman Noi' (We are not traitors). The message was prominently displayed at a preparatory meeting organised on Thursday by Kunal Ghosh, the party's North Kolkata district president.

Speaking to workers by phone, Mamata urged loyalists to remain united. "Those who still have good sense should return. Those who have left are neither here nor there. We cannot sell the party for money," she said.

"Even if only five workers remain with us, we will go to Dharmatala on July 21," the former chief minister added.

To many in the state's political class, the remark captured how sharply the party's circumstances have changed.

Earlier July 21 rallies often resembled political carnivals, with celebrity appearances, cultural programmes, fleets of buses bringing supporters from across the state and a steady parade of leaders crossing over from rival parties.

The event commemorates the 13 Youth Congress activists killed in



police firing during a protest in Kolkata in 1993. Over time, it evolved into the Trinamool's largest annual political showcase.

Now, party insiders acknowledge an uncomfortable irony: the culture of defections that once helped build the TMC's dominance has become a source of vulnerability.

"The challenge before us is different this time. The focus is on those workers and leaders who stood by the party during difficult times but perhaps never received the recognition they deserved," Ghosh told party workers.

In this photo from July 21, 2026, supporters of the All India Trinamool Congress attend the Martyrs' Rally in Kolkata.

According to TMC leaders close to Banerjee, this year's mobilisation effort is aimed less at recruiting new faces than at reassuring grassroots workers unsettled by the organisational collapse that followed the party's electoral defeat.

"There are thousands of workers who stayed despite intimidation, despite losing power and despite offers from other camps. They are the backbone of the organisation. This July 21 is for

them," a senior leader close to the party leadership said.

The rebel camp rejects that narrative, arguing that the exodus reflects a failure of leadership rather than a crisis of loyalty.

"When MPs, MLAs, district leaders and grassroots workers leave in such large numbers, the problem cannot be explained away by calling everyone a traitor. The leadership is refusing to accept the verdict of its own workers," a senior leader aligned with Ritabrata Banerjee said.

"The issue is not betrayal. The issue is that a handful of people monopolised the party for years and ignored genuine workers. Today, those workers are seeking an alternative political future. Labelling them traitors will not solve the crisis," he said.

Meanwhile, Mamata has continued to attack the dissidents, arguing that many changed sides after the BJP came to power in order to protect their own interests. "Workers fought and got them elected. Today, they are joining hands with those they fought against. Those who betrayed the party cannot be forgiven," she said in her address.

In this photo from July 21, 2026, supporters of the All India Trinamool Congress attend the Martyrs' Rally in Kolkata.

The preparations are unfolding amid legal scrutiny as well.

The Calcutta High Court recently directed notices to Mamata and Abhishek in connection with a public interest litigation linked to an alleged violation of court directives during a 2018 programme at Dharmatala.

Yet analysts say the more immediate challenge for the Trinamool is organisational, not legal.

With the party split, its symbol under challenge and many former loyalists now aligned with a rival camp, the July 21 rally is no longer simply a commemorative event or a platform for announcing future strategy.

Instead, it has become a public measure of whether the party can still command loyalty after one of the most dramatic ruptures in its history.

As one senior Trinamool leader put it: "Earlier, the question was how many new people would join us on July 21. This year, the question is how many are still willing to stay."

INTERNATIONAL

West Asia: Massive Shiite crowds mark Ashoura amid fresh Iran-Israel-US war fallout

NABATIYEH

Shiite Muslims marked one of the most important days on their calendar on Friday with large gatherings in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and other parts of the world to remember the seventh-century killing of Hussein, the grand son of Islam's Prophet Muhammad.

The annual commemoration, known as Ashoura, is marked on the 10th day of the month of Muharram in the lunar-based Islamic calendar. Ashoura is the culmination of a 10-day mourning period and marks the day Hussein was killed alongside members of his family and companions as he fought against the army of Caliph Yazid, to whom Hussein had refused to pledge allegiance.

Hussein's killing cemented the schism between Sunni and Shiite Islam and remains a powerful symbol of resistance against oppression and injustice.

Ashoura this year comes after a war between predominantly Shiite Iran and the United States and Israel, who launched strikes on the country on Feb. 28, killing senior officials including Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The 86-year-old Khamenei was not just Iran's top political leader but also had a final say on all religious matters and was revered by millions of Shiites worldwide.

A funeral procession for Khamenei is scheduled to take place in early July.

On Friday, large crowds of people gathered in the Iraqi Shiite holy city of Karbala to mark Ashoura. Hussein is buried in the city where he was killed in the battle that took place in 680, and his shrine is visited by millions of Shiites from around the world every year.

In Baghdad, thousands marched through the streets, including some who slashed their heads with razors and performed other forms of self-flagellation in a show of grief to mark the occasion.

In Lebanon, where a fragile ceasefire between Israel and the Iran-backed Hezbollah is in place, thousands of black-



clad mourners gathered in Beirut's southern suburbs at a shrine to Hezbollah's former long-time leader, Hassan Nasrallah, who was killed in a series of massive Israeli strikes in 2024.

Women clutched photographs of sons and brothers killed in the war — while others held photographs of Nasrallah or Iran's Khamenei, who was killed in February in an attack by the US and Israel.

Many of them sobbed. Expressions of grief for the death of the Imam Hussein are traditional during Ashoura, but many of the mourners were also grieving more personal losses.

Naghm Jaber said her fiancé was killed in the war.

"This war was truly harsh on all of us, and now we are feeling the meaning

of Ashoura more than usual," she said.

In the southern Lebanese city of Nabatiyeh, that is usually a major center to commemorate Ashoura, dozens of people gathered near the main square, much of which was destroyed by Israeli airstrikes over the past weeks, with some of them inflicting head injuries on themselves to express their mourning. The practice is widely opposed by many Shiites, including Hezbollah.

Earlier on Friday, state media and Associated Press journalists on the ground reported two Israeli airstrikes on the nearby village of Nabatiyeh al-Fawq. It was not immediately clear if the strike inflicted any casualties.

"Despite all the hardships, everything happening to the Shiite Muslim community, and the wars we are facing, we came to reaffirm our loyalty, our love and our

unwavering passion for Imam Hussein," said Khader Kamal.

To Shiites, who make up the second-largest branch of Islam after the Sunni majority, the killing of Hussein holds deep religious and historical resonance and plays a key role in shaping identity.

Hezbollah's leader, Naim Kassem, said in a speech Friday that Ashoura is being repeated again by the US and Israel, adding that his group and its supporters were subjected to a "war of elimination."

"America and Israel also wanted to eliminate Iran by removing the regime and controlling the country," Kassem said. "The memorandum of understanding is a declaration of defeat for America and Israel," Kassem said of the deal reached this month between Washington and Tehran.

'Unprecedented spike' in new synthetic drugs: UN watchdog



VIENNA

Drug use around the world is rising, including a worrying increase of new potent and dangerous synthetic drugs, a UN watchdog warned on Friday.

An estimated 331 million people used a drug in 2024, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said in its 2026 World Drug Report.

This is 6.2 percent of the global population aged 15-64, an increase from 5.2 percent in 2014.

Cannabis remained the most popular drug globally in 2024, followed by opioids, amphetamines, cocaine and ecstasy, the UNODC said.

But novel synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, nitazenes and orphines, sought as a heroin substitute, have become increasingly available.

"We have seen an unprecedented spike in new types of drugs on

the market, and worryingly, some are more potent or dangerous than before," UNODC head Monica Juma said in a statement.

Drug producers kept coming up with new synthetic drugs "in attempts to skirt regulations and avoid detection," the agency said.

Drug seizures in 2024 revealed "five times more drug types" than before 2000, it added.

"The number of new psychoactive substances (NPS) reported to have been circulating in drug markets... reached 755 in 2024, with 118 of these substances reported for the first time," the UNODC said.

The global opium and heroin market was still heavily affected by the ban on poppy cultivation introduced by the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2022, the report said.

This has made drug dealers look for synthetic alternatives like fentanyl.

"A turn away from

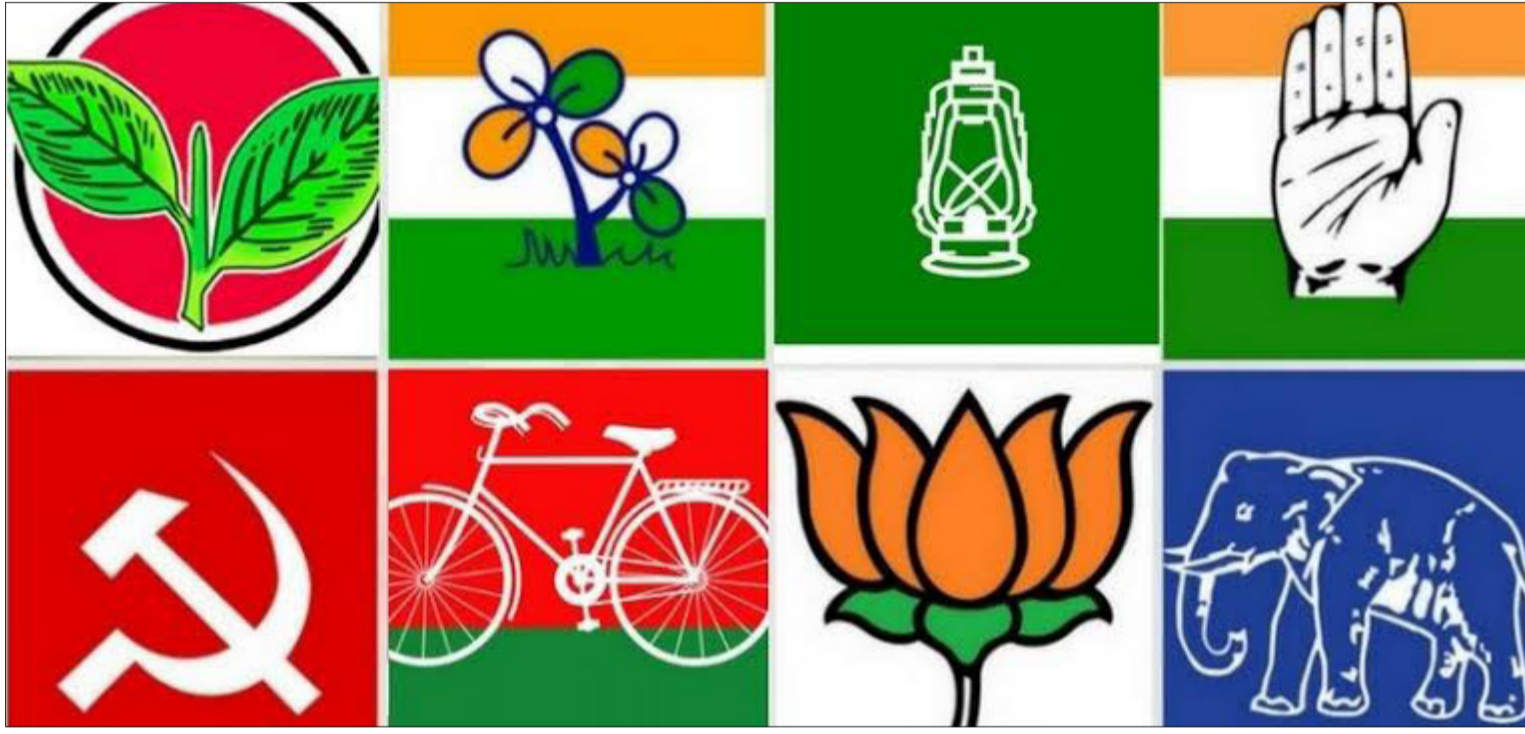
plant-based opiates toward synthetics could cause a permanent shift in the global opioid market, with ramifications on how these drugs are used and the harms therein," the UNODC said.

The watchdog also observed the emergence of new markets for methamphetamine, produced largely by Myanmar, but also in North America, west and southern Africa and southwest Asia.

Cannabis use keeps growing too, also because of legalisation and decriminalisation — user numbers grew by 40 percent between 2014 and 2024 as almost five percent of the global population aged 15-64 used cannabis in 2024.

Cocaine output grew more than fourfold over the monitored decade, and traffickers increased supplies targeting both established markets in Europe, America and Oceania, but also new ones in Africa and Asia, the UNODC said.

The Shrinking Space for Regional Parties in India's New Political Order



For nearly three decades after 1989, regional parties occupied a pivotal position in Indian democracy. They shaped coalition governments, influenced national policy, and often determined who governed in New Delhi. From Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, and Assam, regional formations emerged as powerful expressions of local aspirations and federal politics. Today, however, that era appears to be fading. While the number of registered political parties has increased and voter participation remains robust, the political influence of regional parties is steadily diminishing.

The paradox is striking. India's democracy is witnessing high electoral participation, intense political competition, and the emergence of new political formations. Yet the actual space available for regional parties to function independently is shrinking. The growing dominance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the consolidation of alliances have fundamentally altered the political landscape. As a result, many regional parties are no longer decisive players; instead, they increasingly function as junior partners within larger alliance structures.

The decline is not uniform. Some regional parties continue to remain influential and electorally relevant. Others have weakened significantly, while a growing number have become dependent on national alliances for survival. Together, these trends reveal a deeper transformation in Indian politics—one that is redefining the balance between regional autonomy and national political power.

From Kingmakers to Alliance Partners

The rise of regional parties was closely linked to the fragmentation of national politics after the decline of Congress dominance in the late 1980s. The coalition era allowed state-based parties to exert influence far beyond their geographical boundaries. Parties such as the Samajwadi Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Telugu Desam Party, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Shiromani Akali Dal, Janata Dal factions, and numerous others became indispensable components of government formation at the Centre.

This arrangement created a political equilibrium. Regional parties could negotiate with either the Congress or the BJP, leveraging their support in exchange for political concessions, ministerial positions, or policy commitments. Their strength rested on their ability to balance competing national forces.

That balance has gradually disappeared.

The emergence of the BJP as a dominant national force since 2014 has transformed the electoral system. Instead of fragmented coalition politics, India increasingly resembles a bipolar contest between the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the Congress-led opposition bloc. In such a framework, regional parties find themselves with less room to manoeuvre. They can influence outcomes, but rarely determine them.



The inventor of the television would not let his own children watch TV.

The shift from "balancing" to "bandwagoning" has become one of the defining features of contemporary Indian politics. Regional

parties that once acted as independent centres of power now frequently align themselves with one of the two major alliance structures. Their survival often depends on maintaining these partnerships rather than expanding their own autonomous political space.

Uneven Fortunes Across States

The experience of regional parties varies significantly across India. Several once-dominant regional forces have witnessed a steady decline. The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh has lost much of its electoral influence. The Shiromani Akali Dal, once central to Punjab politics, has struggled to regain its former prominence. The All India United Democratic Front in Assam, the Janata Dal (Secular) in Karnataka, and the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu have all experienced varying degrees of erosion in their political strength.

At the same time, new regional forces have emerged. The Aam Aadmi Party achieved power in Delhi and Punjab before facing electoral setbacks. The Zoram People's Movement rose to prominence in Mizoram. Actor Vijay's Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam has generated significant political attention in Tamil Nadu, though its long-term prospects remain uncertain.

A third category consists of resilient regional parties that continue to dominate their states despite changing national dynamics. The Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, the DMK in Tamil Nadu, the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference, the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha, and the Telugu Desam Party have demonstrated an ability to withstand political pressures and retain their relevance. Yet even among these successful examples, the challenge remains the same: how to preserve autonomy in an increasingly centralised political environment.

Why Dominant Alliances Prefer Dependent Partners

An interesting feature of contemporary politics is that dominant national alliances often have little interest in

linguistic identities, and cultural networks that strengthen the alliance's reach. These relationships are particularly valuable in regions where local political traditions remain strong.

Regional alliances also serve an important electoral purpose. By partnering with influential state-based parties, the BJP can limit opportunities for the Congress and other opposition forces to build broader coalitions. Fragmented opposition often translates into electoral advantage for the ruling alliance.

In Parliament, alliances with regional parties are equally important. Constitutional amendments and major legislative initiatives frequently require broad political support. Maintaining cooperative relationships with regional parties therefore becomes a strategic necessity.

Consequently, the objective is often not to replace regional parties entirely but to ensure that they operate within a framework where the dominant national party sets the agenda.

Structural Challenges Beyond Electoral Politics

The difficulties facing regional parties cannot be explained solely by the BJP's rise. Many of their problems are internal and long-standing.

Leadership succession is perhaps the most significant challenge. A large number of regional parties revolve around charismatic founders or political families. As leadership transitions occur, organisational weaknesses become visible. Internal democracy is often limited, and succession disputes can trigger factionalism and defections.

Dynastic politics, once considered a source of continuity, has increasingly become a source of vulnerability. Younger leaders frequently struggle to command the same authority as their predecessors, while party structures remain heavily personalised.

Ideological ambiguity presents another challenge. Many regional parties were founded around specific social movements, linguistic identities, or regional grievances. As those issues evolve, parties often struggle to redefine their political purpose. Without



completely eliminating regional parties. Instead, they benefit from keeping them politically dependent.

For the BJP-led NDA, regional allies provide legitimacy and local acceptance in states where national narratives alone may not be sufficient. Regional partners offer access to social coalitions,

linguistic identities, and cultural networks that strengthen the alliance's reach. These relationships are particularly valuable in regions where local political traditions remain strong.

Financial resources and organisational capacity also matter. National parties possess significantly greater

resources, allowing them to sustain extensive campaign machinery, digital outreach, and grassroots mobilisation. Regional parties frequently find it difficult to compete on similar terms.

The Impact of Centralised Political Narratives

Another factor contributing to the decline of regional parties is the growing importance of national political narratives.

Issues such as citizenship, national security, delimitation, electoral reforms, and welfare delivery increasingly dominate public discourse. These are subjects over which state governments often have limited authority. Nevertheless, they shape voter behaviour and electoral outcomes.

National parties, particularly the BJP, have demonstrated a remarkable ability to frame political debates around such issues. This allows them to influence elections even in states where regional identities remain strong.

Regional parties often find themselves reacting rather than leading. They may disagree with national policies, but they frequently struggle to present alternative narratives with comparable reach and resonance.

The result is a shift in agenda-setting power. Political conversations increasingly originate at the national level, reducing the ability of regional parties to define electoral contests on their own terms.

Defections, Splits and the Politics of Survival

The changing balance of power has also encouraged political instability within regional parties.

Several prominent regional formations have faced internal rebellions, leading to splits and realignments. In many cases, dissident leaders calculate that aligning with a dominant national alliance offers better prospects than remaining within weakened regional structures.

The phenomenon highlights a broader reality of contemporary politics: power attracts political actors. When one alliance appears significantly stronger than its rivals, the incentives for defections increase.

For regional parties, this creates a vicious cycle. Electoral setbacks weaken organisational cohesion, which in turn encourages further defections and political fragmentation.

Can Regional Parties Reinvent Themselves?

Despite these challenges, predictions about the complete decline of regional parties would be premature.

India remains a deeply diverse society with strong regional identities. Language, culture, caste dynamics, economic priorities, and local governance issues continue to vary significantly across states. These realities provide fertile ground for regional political movements.

The resilience of parties such as the DMK, TMC, SP, JMM, and TDP demonstrates that regional politics remains capable of adapting to changing circumstances. State elections continue to produce outcomes that differ sharply from national trends, indicating that regional concerns still matter to voters. The key question is whether regional parties can modernise their organisational structures, broaden their ideological appeal, and manage leadership transitions more effectively. Their future may depend less on opposing national parties and more on developing credible governance models that resonate with younger voters.

A New Phase of Indian Federal Politics

The story of regional parties is ultimately the story of Indian federalism itself. For decades, these parties acted as powerful intermediaries between local aspirations and national decision-making. Their rise reflected the diversity of India's political landscape.

Today, the political system is moving towards greater centralisation, with national alliances exercising unprecedented influence. Regional parties are not disappearing, but they are operating in a more constrained environment than at any point since the coalition era began.

Whether they continue to decline or discover new pathways to relevance will shape the future of Indian democracy. What is clear, however, is that the age of regional parties as independent kingmakers has largely given way to an era in which power is increasingly concentrated within broader national political architectures. The challenge before regional forces is not merely electoral survival; it is the preservation of political autonomy in a system that is steadily becoming more centralised and leader-driven.

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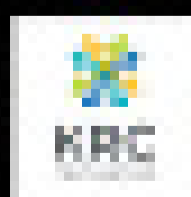


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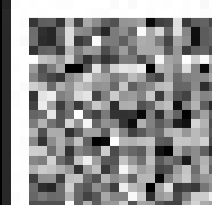


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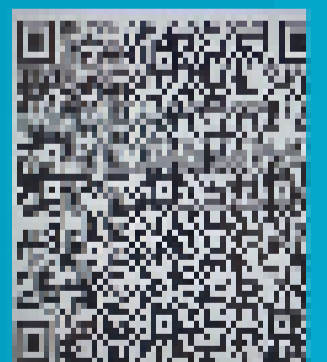
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