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Siang dam row: Amit Shah promises best rehabilitation package, urges Arunachal communities to engage in dialogue

Home Minister says no final decision on 11,200 MW project without consultations; assures protection of indigenous identity and cultural traditions amid local opposition



BANDERDEWA

Union Home Minister Amit Shah sought to address growing opposition to the proposed Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP) in Arunachal Pradesh, assuring project-affected communities that they would receive the country's best rehabilitation package and that no final decision would be taken without consultations and dialogue with local residents.

Acknowledging concerns among people in the Siang region, Shah said the Centre would respect the cultural identity, traditions and interests of indigenous communities while discussing the proposed hydropower project.

Addressing the President's Police Colour Award Ceremony at Banderdewa on November 21, the Home Minister appealed to residents to engage with the Arunachal Pradesh government and participate in discussions to find an acceptable way forward.

"The Siang project is a national project, which is for the country's development, power generation, generation of income in Arunachal. This project is seen as a very strategic one," Shah said, highlighting its developmental, economic and strategic significance.

However, he emphasised that the project would move forward through consultations rather than unilateral decisions.

"On this, I would like to assure my people of Siang that we will move ahead with positive discussions, consultations regarding this project and only through dialogue will we come to a final decision. You need not worry about this," he said.

Seeking to reassure communities apprehensive about displacement and the possible loss of ancestral land, Shah said their cultural identity would be respected and rehabilitation would not be compromised.

"As much as you respect your culture, we also respect your identity and culture. Without any compromise, country's best rehabilitation package will be offered to the people of Siang," the Home Minister said.

He urged residents to hold constructive discussions with the state government, indicating that dialogue would remain central to resolving the differences surrounding the project.The proposed 11,200 MW Siang Upper Multipurpose Project has triggered opposition from several local organisations and residents, who fear that its implementation could lead to the submergence of villages, displacement of indigenous communities and loss of ancestral land. Concerns have also been raised over the possible impact on traditional livelihoods, cultural practices and the social fabric of the Siang region.Beyond its hydropower potential, the project carries considerable strategic importance for India because of China's proposed large hydropower project on the Yarlung Tsangpo river in Tibet. The river enters India as the Siang in Arunachal Pradesh before flowing into Assam, where it becomes part of the Brahmaputra river system.

Shah's assurance comes amid continuing protests and demands from anti-dam groups for greater transparency, safeguards for indigenous communities and meaningful consultation before the project advances.While the Home Minister's appeal signals the Centre's willingness to engage with the affected population, the challenge ahead will be to translate the assurances on rehabilitation, cultural protection and consultation into concrete commitments acceptable to the communities concerned.

PERSPECTIVE

You were born to make mistakes, not to fake perfection.

Delhi court seeks Mary Kom's response to ex-husband's defamation complaint

NEW DELHI

A Delhi court has issued a pre-summoning notice to Olympic bronze medallist M.C. Mary Kom in a criminal defamation complaint filed by her former husband, Karung Onkholer, over alleged defamatory remarks made during a television interview.

Judicial Magistrate First Class Shivam Gupta of the Saket Courts issued the notice on Friday after recording pre-summoning statements from three individuals, including the complainant. The court has fixed December 21 as the next date of hearing and asked Kom to respond through her legal counsel.

In his complaint, filed on October 6 under Section 356 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), Onkholer alleged that Kom made false and malicious statements about him during a television interview broadcast on January 11, 2026.Represented by advocate Akash Krishna, Onkholer claimed that the interview portrayed him as dishonest, unfaithful, unemployed and financially dependent on Kom. He also alleged that she accused him of misappropriating money from her bank accounts, taking loans without authorisation, mortgaging her properties and neglecting his parental responsibilities towards their four children.The complainant contended that the remarks had damaged his reputation in Manipur and beyond, leaving him feeling publicly targeted.Onkholer further claimed that he had set aside his own sporting and professional ambitions to manage the household and support Kom's career, during which she won six world titles and an Olympic medal. The couple married on March 12, 2005, and their marriage was dissolved under customary Kom law on December 20, 2023.

WHO SAID WHAT



The soil of West Bengal is sacred, where new ideas have gained strength and diverse currents of the national movement have taken shape.

IIT Kharagpur stands upon that very ground where a detention camp for freedom fighters once operated.

What did the freedom fighters imprisoned here discuss all day long? What did they ponder? What dreams did they cherish?

Even today, in every particle of this entire atmosphere, their way of life, reflections, and deeds seem to echo like a mantra, continually inspiring you to produce the next generation of India who shall make India Atmanirbhar through their innovation and ideas!

– Narendra Modi, PM

Silchar elevated corridor plan revised; Two flyovers, 2.5-km four-lane road proposed at Rs700 crore



SILCHAR

The proposed elevated corridor in Silchar is set for a major redesign, with the state government considering a revised infrastructure plan involving two separate flyovers and a 2.5-km four-lane road at an estimated cost of ?700 crore.

The revised proposal, discussed at a meeting at the Cachar District Commissioner's office on Friday, seeks to address concerns raised by different stakeholders over the utility and effectiveness of the earlier plan for a continuous elevated road between Capital Point and Rangirkhari.

Cabinet Minister Kaushik Rai, who also heads the Housing and Urban Affairs Department, said the new design envisages widening the stretch from Capital Point to Gopinath Cinema Hall into a four-lane road of approximately 2.5 km.

The plan also includes a 542-metre flyover connecting Krishnacharan Pathshala with Gopinath Cinema Hall and another 500-metre flyover between Sadarghat and the Radio Station.

The connecting road will have a central divider, improved drainage, footpaths and dedicated spaces for utility services, Rai said. The proposed changes are intended to ease Silchar's persistent traffic congestion and improve the city's transport infrastructure and urban landscape.

The meeting was attended by elected representatives, senior Public Works Department officials, business associations, social organisations and prominent citizens. Rai said participants, including those who had earlier raised objections to the continuous flyover proposal, had agreed to the revised plan.The new proposal marks a shift from the earlier design of a 3.5-km elevated road-cum-flyover between Rangirkhari and Capital Point, which was estimated to cost around ?580 crore.Rai said the PWD Commissioner and Chief Engineer would forward the revised proposal to Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma for consideration and approval. The detailed design will be shared with stakeholders after the government clears the proposal.

The revised plan now places the focus on a combination of flyovers and road widening rather than a single continuous elevated corridor. Its final shape and implementation will depend on the state government's approval.

Assam's temporary forest workers to get personal accident insurance under Prince William-led initiative

GUWAHATI

Temporary forest rangers in Assam are set to receive dedicated personal accident insurance under a new five-year conservation initiative announced by Prince William, the Prince of Wales, in partnership with The Royal Foundation's United for Wildlife.

The programme, covering 10,000 temporary rangers across seven Indian states, including Assam, will come into effect from December 2026. Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Uttarakhand, Maharashtra, Kerala and Rajasthan are the other states covered under the initiative.

The insurance scheme is aimed at protecting forest personnel who work in difficult and often dangerous conditions to safeguard wildlife and forest habitats. It will provide financial protection to rangers and their families in the event of death or serious injuries sustained while performing their duties.

The initiative is particularly significant for Assam, where forest personnel are engaged in protecting wildlife habitats and monitoring protected areas amid challenges such as poaching, illegal activities and difficult working conditions.

A substantial section of the country's conservation workforce comprises temporary and daily-wage forest watchers who perform responsibilities similar to those of permanent government employees but often lack comparable social security benefits.

Unlike regular forest staff, many temporary rangers are not covered by government insurance schemes. Consequently, families of those killed or seriously injured while on duty can face financial hardship without adequate compensation or income support.

Announcing the initiative at the conclusion of his India visit on Friday, Prince William said wildlife rangers across the country worked day and night on the frontline of conservation, patrolling remote forests and facing significant risks to protect wildlife for future generations.

Nagaland Chief Secretary stresses financial discipline, resource mobilisation

KOHIMA

Nagaland Chief Secretary Sentiyanger Imchen has called for stronger financial management and improved resource mobilisation, stressing the need for a clear roadmap to maximise available resources and address financial constraints in the state.

Addressing the first annual Finance Department Conclave and Team Synergy Day 2026 at the multipurpose hall of the Nagaland Legislative Assembly in Kohima on Friday, Imchen said effective financial management was essential for a resource-constrained state like Nagaland.

He emphasised the need to augment resources, plug administrative loopholes and revenue leakages, and ensure that public services were delivered efficiently to citizens.

The Chief Secretary pointed out that planning alone would not produce the desired results without effective implementation, coordination and integration among the different wings of the Finance Department. He called for greater institutional cooperation to translate policy decisions into tangible outcomes.

Highlighting the role of technology in financial governance, Imchen said Nagaland had made progress in integrating administrative and financial systems through the Nagaland Integrated Financial Management Information System (NIFMIS), TreasuryNET and e-Bill platforms, alongside national systems such as the Public Financial Management System (PFMS) and SNA-SPARSH.

However, he cautioned that technological upgrades and administrative rules alone could not eliminate institutional divisions. Resistance to change and differences between departments over jurisdiction and autonomy continued to affect coordination, he observed.

Imchen stressed that interpersonal skills, including empathy, effective communication, collaborative problem-solving and adaptability, were equally important in building a cohesive administrative structure.

Urging government officials to move beyond conventional working practices, he called on them to embrace technological advancements and modern governance methods. Senior officers, he said, should take the lead in driving institutional change and administrative progress.

Referring to Nagaland Vision 2030, the Chief Secretary advocated a shift in approach from merely identifying problems and administrative bottlenecks to developing practical solutions and ensuring their effective implementation.

He said the Finance Department conclave provided an important platform for policymakers and senior officials to deliberate on the state's financial and economic priorities while strengthening coordination and cooperation among its various wings.

The discussions, he added, should help develop a more integrated approach to financial administration, resource management and public service delivery.

NIA probes possible Northeast insurgent links of US national; drone training under scanner

Agency seeks to identify Indian insurgent groups allegedly trained by Matthew VanDyke in Myanmar; porous India-Myanmar border poses surveillance challenges



NEW DELHI

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) is investigating whether insurgent organisations operating in India's Northeast received training from US national Matthew VanDyke, particularly in the use of drones, during his alleged activities in neighbouring Myanmar.

NIA Director General Rakesh Aggarwal said the agency was examining the identities of Indian insurgents who may have received training from VanDyke, a former US special forces personnel. The investigation is focusing on whether his alleged training activities extended beyond Myanmar-based armed groups to insurgent outfits operating in India's northeastern states.

"We are investigating who are the Indian insurgents who were trained by VanDyke," Aggarwal told reporters in New Delhi on Friday, following the conclusion of the two-day Anti-Terror Conference organised by the NIA.

The investigation comes after allegations that VanDyke provided drone-related training to insurgent groups in Myanmar. Investigators are now examining whether Indian insurgent organisations also benefited from such training and whether the activities have any cross-border security implications.

Aggarwal said VanDyke had entered India on a valid visa but subsequently crossed into Myanmar illegally.

"Matthew VanDyke came on a valid visa. But he crossed into Myanmar illegally and trained certain insurgent groups," the NIA chief said, adding that he could potentially return to India through the same route.

The NIA chief also flagged the security challenges posed by the porous India-Myanmar border, where traditional cross-border movement among communities living along the frontier complicates surveillance and enforcement.

The established flexibility in movement among ethnic communities on both sides of the border, he said, remains a challenge for security agencies seeking to monitor illegal cross-border activities.

The issue featured against the broader backdrop of discussions on cross-border terrorism at the sixth Anti-Terror Conference, held at DRDO Bhawan in New Delhi on November 19 and 20.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah, addressing the conference, called for stronger coordination between central and state agencies and improvements in the investigation and prosecution of terrorism-related cases.

Shah urged states to strengthen their Anti-Terrorism Squads (ATS) by adopting the Model ATS framework. He also advocated dedicated cyber expert units within state ATS formations to address the growing use of technology by terrorist organisations.

Emphasising a coordinated approach, the Home Minister called for action against the wider terror ecosystem, including cross-border handlers, financial networks, organised crime links and local facilitators. He also highlighted the need to strengthen financial investigations to trace and dismantle terror funding networks.

The two-day conference, organised around the theme 'Cross-Border Terrorism', brought together 40 directors general and heads of state police forces and central agencies, along with 230 officers from state anti-terror investigation units.Providing an overview of the agency's performance, Aggarwal said the NIA had registered 82 cases in 2026 so far. Of the 29 cases in which judgments were delivered during the year, the agency secured convictions in 27, recording a conviction rate of 93 per cent.

The agency also trained 5,800 police personnel through 53 programmes to strengthen their capacity to investigate terrorism-related cases.

To improve the use of technology and digital evidence, Technical Support Units have been established in all 21 NIA state units, Aggarwal said.

He added that 25 exclusive NIA courts were currently operational, while another 14 were expected to be established shortly to facilitate faster trials.

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INDIA MUST SHAPE THE NEW WORLD ORDER

The most important question raised by the proposed meeting of Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping in Shenzhen is not whether the three leaders can reach an understanding. It is whether the rest of the world will have any meaningful say in the arrangements that may follow. At a time when geopolitical equations are being recalibrated, the possibility of Washington, Moscow and Beijing finding common ground deserves attention not simply as a diplomatic development but as a potential turning point in the distribution of global power.

For India, the challenge is particularly significant. New Delhi has spent decades building relationships with competing power centres while protecting its freedom of diplomatic action. That approach has served the country well in a world divided by rivalries. But the emerging international environment demands something more ambitious. India cannot remain satisfied with managing the consequences of decisions taken by others. It must acquire the capacity to influence those decisions.

The historical comparison with the 1945 Yalta Conference is instructive, although the circumstances are fundamentally different. The meeting of Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin helped determine the post-war political architecture of Europe. It also demonstrated how major powers could negotiate the future of entire regions without giving smaller nations an effective voice. The proposed Shenzhen engagement does not necessarily signal a similar division of the world. Yet it raises an uncomfortable possibility: that the interests of powerful states may once again take precedence over the sovereignty and aspirations of countries outside their immediate calculations.

The three leaders are approaching the proposed engagement with different priorities. Trump wants to place nuclear arms control and international security back on the negotiating table. Putin seeks to restore Russia's diplomatic standing and demonstrate that Moscow remains central to global affairs. Xi Jinping has an opportunity to project China as an indispensable power in shaping international outcomes. Their interests may overlap in certain areas, but the underlying strategic competition remains substantial.

The implications for India extend well beyond the immediate outcome of the meeting. A possible improvement in US-Russia relations could alter the geopolitical environment in which New Delhi operates. A new understanding between Washington and Moscow might reduce international tensions, but it could also change the dynamics of defence cooperation, energy markets and strategic alignments. India must welcome any genuine movement towards peace without assuming that an agreement between major powers will automatically protect its interests.

Russia remains an important pillar of India's defence preparedness and energy security. However, Moscow's growing dependence on Beijing has introduced a new complication into this relationship. India cannot ignore the possibility that changing Russian priorities may affect its long-standing strategic partnership. The answer is neither to distance itself from Moscow nor to rely indefinitely on historical goodwill. It must strengthen domestic defence production, diversify procurement and develop technological capabilities that reduce external vulnerabilities.

The American relationship presents a different set of opportunities and uncertainties. Cooperation in defence technology, critical supply chains, trade and maritime security has expanded significantly. Yet India's interests will not always coincide with Washington's priorities. New Delhi must therefore resist the temptation to view closer engagement with the United States as a substitute for an independent foreign policy. Strategic partnerships are valuable precisely because they advance mutual interests, not because they demand political conformity.

China remains the most immediate long-term strategic challenge. The unresolved boundary dispute, Beijing's expanding footprint in South Asia and its growing maritime presence in the Indian Ocean demand sustained attention. Any understanding between Washington and Beijing that overlooks India's security concerns could create serious complications for regional stability. New Delhi must make it clear that the future of the Indo-Pacific cannot be negotiated exclusively between powers outside the region.

But India's response cannot be limited to strategic caution. There is a danger that the language of strategic autonomy may become a comfortable justification for avoiding difficult choices or postponing necessary reforms. Autonomy is meaningful only when backed by economic strength, technological independence, military preparedness and diplomatic credibility. Without these foundations, the freedom to make independent decisions remains largely theoretical.

This is where India's foreign policy needs a broader vision. Participation in the Quad, BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation reflects the country's ability to engage with different geopolitical groupings. Such flexibility should be preserved. However, diplomatic participation must translate into measurable influence. India should use these platforms not merely to communicate its concerns but to shape agendas, build coalitions and advance initiatives that reflect its national and regional priorities.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"I never lie because I don't fear anyone. You only lie when you're afraid." ~ John Gotti

Barak-Based Regional Political Party: Relevance and Challenges



PRADIP DUTTA ROY

Since Independence, the Barak Valley, comprising the three districts of southern Assam, has struggled to achieve its desired level of socioeconomic development. Despite considerable potential in agriculture, natural resources, industry and trade, problems relating to employment, connectivity, healthcare, education and infrastructure remain unresolved.

Allegations of administrative neglect and developmental discrimination have surfaced repeatedly. Demands for separate statehood or Union Territory status have also been raised, but none has developed into a sustained political movement.

Against this backdrop, an important question arises: When regional political parties elsewhere in India have successfully asserted their regions' interests in state and national politics, how relevant would a similar political force be for the Barak Valley? What obstacles would it face?

This article seeks not to advocate a predetermined conclusion but to encourage informed public debate.

Political Representation versus Regional Interests

Since Independence, the Barak Valley has elected numerous legislators and parliamentarians, some of whom have served as ministers in state and Union governments.

Yet several questions remain. How effectively have these representatives addressed the Valley's longstanding problems? Where does Barak stand among the priorities of national political parties? When party loyalty conflicts with regional interests, which receives precedence?

Most elected representatives undoubtedly wish to serve their constituencies. However, national parties have broader political compulsions, within which the demands of a particular region may not always receive priority. Representatives may consequently find it difficult to adopt independent positions.

This highlights the distinction between electoral representation and effective regional representation.

The people of Barak elect their representatives, but whether those representatives collectively exert sufficient political pressure to protect regional interests remains debatable.

Could an independent regional political party overcome this limitation?

Barak's Distinct Historical and Cultural Identity

The Barak Valley differs from the Brahmaputra Valley geographically, historically and culturally.

Although influenced by ancient Kamarupa and subsequently connected with the Tripura, Koch and Dimasa kingdoms, Barak maintained longstanding linguistic and cultural relationships with greater Bengal and the Surma Valley.

In 1874, the British administration transferred Sylhet and Cachar from Bengal to the newly constituted Chief Commissionership of Assam. The Partition of 1947 and the Sylhet referendum subsequently altered the region's political geography. The Language Movement of 1961 became a defining moment in Barak's regional consciousness. On 19 May, eleven language martyrs lost their lives at Silchar Railway Station while asserting linguistic and democratic rights.

Subsequent movements, particularly the struggle for Assam University, again demonstrated the Valley's collective strength.

Nevertheless, these movements never produced a permanent regional political organisation. Understanding why requires serious introspection.

The Bodoland Experience: Lessons for Barak

Bodoland offers a particularly relevant comparison because both regions belong to Assam, yet their experiences of political bargaining have differed considerably.

Through sustained movements, the Bodo community secured important institutional gains, including the establishment of the Bodoland Territorial Council in 2003 and the Bodo Peace Accord of 2020.

Regional parties such as the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) and United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) subsequently became influential participants in Assam's political landscape.

Following the 2023 delimitation, Assembly constituencies in the Bodoland Territorial Region increased from 11 to 15, while Barak Valley's representation declined from 15 to 13.

Bodoland's regional parties have also participated in coalition governments. The BPF joined the BJP-led government in 2016, while the UPPL subsequently allied with the BJP. The BPF's decisive victory in the 2025 Bodoland Territorial Council elections further demonstrated its regional political relevance.

These developments illustrate how organised regional political forces can influence larger parties.

Assam has 126 Assembly seats. A Barak-based party controlling even a substantial proportion of its 13 constituencies could not independently form a government. However, in a hung Assembly, a relatively small regional party might exercise considerable bargaining power.

Conversely, its influence would be limited when a major party commands a comfortable majority.

Thus, political bargaining power depends on electoral circumstances and cannot be guaranteed.

Beyond Ministerial Positions: Institutional Empowerment

Should a regional party merely seek ministerial positions, or should its primary objective be permanent administrative and financial empowerment?

Assam already has a Barak Valley Development Department. However, its actual authority, independent budget, project approval powers and implementation capacity deserve critical assessment.

A regional political force could demand greater administrative powers, adequate funding, coordinated development planning and transparent expenditure monitoring.

Another important possibility is a separate Barak Valley Economic Development Council, responsible for long-term strategies involving agriculture, industry, tourism, natural resources, connectivity and employment.

Such a council could include elected representatives, economists, entrepreneurs, agricultural experts and civil society representatives.

Within India's constitutional framework, the state government could establish an appropriate development institution through legislation or administrative arrangements. However, its powers would differ from those of an autonomous council under the Constitution's Sixth Schedule.

Its legal foundation, financial authority and administrative responsibilities would therefore require clear definition.

If institutional reforms fail to address regional aspirations, a political organisation could also encourage democratic debate on greater autonomy, separate statehood or Union Territory status.

Lessons from Other Regional Movements

India's political history provides several instructive examples.

The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha placed tribal rights, land, natural resources and regional identity at the centre of its movement, contributing significantly to Jharkhand's creation in 2000.

The Telangana Rashtra Samithi transformed the demand for separate statehood into a successful political movement, eventually governing Telangana after its formation in 2014. Its subsequent electoral defeat, however, demonstrated that movement-based popularity does not guarantee permanent support.

In Tamil Nadu, the DMK and AIADMK established enduring political influence by combining linguistic identity with social justice and development.

Conversely, the Asom Gana Parishad's experience demonstrates that even parties emerging from powerful mass movements can gradually lose public confidence.

These examples suggest that regional sentiment alone is insufficient. Sustainable success requires realistic policies, capable leadership, organisational discipline and administrative credibility.

Major Challenges for a Barak-Based Regional Party

Despite its potential, establishing an effective regional party in Barak would involve formidable challenges.

First, social and cultural diversity. Barak is home not only to Bengali-speaking Hindus and Muslims but also to Manipuri, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Dimasa, tea-garden and other communities. Each possesses distinct identities and aspirations.

A party representing only one language, religion or community would struggle to gain Valley-wide acceptance. An inclusive regional identity must therefore be its foundation.

Second, religious polarisation. Electoral politics frequently allows communal divisions to overshadow shared economic interests. Replacing divisive narratives with common demands for employment, education, healthcare and development would be essential.

Third, established political competition. National parties possess extensive organisational networks, financial resources and longstanding electoral support. Challenging them would require sustained grassroots mobilisation.

Fourth, credible leadership. A successful regional party would need leaders committed to collective welfare rather than personal ambition. Popular individuals alone cannot sustain an organisation. Fifth, electoral uncertainty. Without sufficient electoral support, a new party might remain politically marginal. Vote splitting could even produce outcomes contrary to its objectives.

These challenges make careful preparation indispensable.

Is a Regional Party the Only Alternative?

A separate political party is not necessarily the only solution.

Elected representatives from different parties could jointly pursue a common regional development agenda. Alternatively, civil society organisations, business associations, academics and social institutions could establish a strong non-political regional platform.

However, past experience suggests that such initiatives have not achieved the desired effectiveness. Instances of elected representatives collectively asserting Barak's interests across party lines remain uncommon.

Mass organisations have undoubtedly contributed to important development projects, but none has emerged as a sustained, representative voice of the entire Valley.

An electorally successful regional party could provide a more direct platform for political bargaining and accountability.

Even without substantial legislative representation, it could independently raise regional concerns, organise democratic protests and challenge administrative neglect without depending on national party leadership.

Nevertheless, such independence would be meaningful only with broad public support, credible leadership and organisational strength.

A practical beginning could involve participation in grassroots democratic institutions, particularly municipal and panchayat elections. These would provide opportunities to test public acceptance, demonstrate administrative competence and gradually develop political credibility.

Conclusion

The Barak Valley possesses a distinguished history of collective struggles, from the Language Movement to the establishment of Assam University. Yet this tradition of unity has never evolved into a lasting regional political force.

Bodoland's experience demonstrates that organised regional parties can acquire political bargaining power, although its historical and constitutional circumstances differ from Barak's.

A Barak-based political initiative could pursue stronger development institutions, a separate economic development council, greater administrative autonomy and informed debate on alternative constitutional arrangements.

However, its success would depend fundamentally on developing an inclusive regional consciousness that places shared interests above religious, linguistic and communal divisions.

Ultimately, the question is not simply whether a new political party should be established.

The fundamental question is whether the people of Barak Valley, irrespective of caste, creed or religion, are prepared to unite around their common aspirations for economic development, administrative rights and political dignity.

The answer will determine the future of any Barak-based regional political force.

The views expressed are personal.

(The author is an Advocate of the Gauhati High Court.)

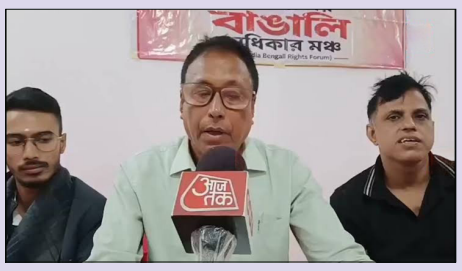
DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

Congress must answer 4 questions:
1. My village was occupied by China in 1962. Will Congress apologize for 1962 humiliation?
2. Congress kept India a poor nation. Why?
3. Why was India called land of snake charmers?
4. Why was India's economy insulted as Hindu rate of growth? ~ Kiren Rijiju, Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Minister of Minority Affairs. MP, Arunachal Pradesh



Sribhumi clash: Bengali rights forum calls Valley-wide protests, alleges selective police action

Black Day observance planned in Silchar on November 23; organisation seeks impartial probe, action against accused police personnel and approaches President



SILCHAR

Alleging discriminatory police action against members of the Bengali community following the Durga Puja immersion clash in Sribhumi, the All India Bengali Rights Forum has announced a series of protests across the Barak Valley on November 23.

The organisation will observe a Black Day in Silchar and other parts of the Valley, while its members plan to hoist black flags at different locations in Sribhumi to protest what they described as police excesses.

The controversy stems from a clash during the Durga Puja immersion procession on Dashami last month, when tensions reportedly erupted between members of the Bengali community and a group of Assamese people over issues related to idol immersion.

Following the incident, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma stated on social media that any attack on Bihu performers was unacceptable and that those responsible should face strict punishment.

The forum has alleged that the Chief Minister's statement was followed by the selective detention of several Bengali community members. It claimed that some of those detained were assaulted in police custody and subsequently arrested and sent to jail.

The organisation has also accused the police of failing to take adequate action against the person it considers the main accused in the original incident, alleging that the investigation has been discriminatory.

The forum said it had been seeking an impartial investigation and fair trial since the incident. On October 30, it submitted a memorandum to the Governor through the District Magistrate, demanding the immediate arrest of the alleged main accused and legal action against police personnel accused of mistreating detainees.

However, the organisation claimed that no satisfactory action had followed its representation.

With the agitation entering a new phase, the forum plans to coordinate demonstrations involving different organisations across all three districts of the Barak Valley. Participants are expected to wear black clothes and hold protests at designated locations.

The organisation also intends to submit a memorandum to the President of India on November 23 and 24, outlining its allegations and expressing concern over what it described as a breakdown of the rule of law.

It further plans to approach Bengali Members of Parliament from outside the Barak Valley, alleging that elected representatives from the region have not adequately raised the issue.

The forum has demanded an impartial investigation, punishment for those found guilty and action against individuals attempting to disturb communal harmony. It has also called for corrective and awareness-building measures to prevent further social tensions.

The allegations against the police have not been independently verified. The administration's response to the forum's latest allegations and demands was not available in the report.

Manipur liquor tragedy: Death toll climbs to 15 in Chandel, over 180 hospitalised

IMPHAL

The death toll in the suspected adulterated liquor tragedy in Manipur's Chandel district has risen to 15, while more than 180 people have been hospitalised over the past 48 hours, prompting the state government to intensify medical intervention and issue a public health advisory.

The deaths were reported between November 18 and 20. Eight fatalities were initially confirmed in an official communication issued by the Chandel Superintendent of Police. The victims were identified as Kishan Hrangbung Anal (32), Hrangbung Beruwng Anal (50), Hrangbung Mohring Anal (46), Rd Angnahiring Anal (37), KI Ramtiang Anal (44), NL Mothahring Anal, Ts Ashing and Ts Lovely.

According to the police, some victims died at their residences, while others died on their way to hospitals or after being admitted to the Community Health Centre at Chakpikarong.

In a subsequent clarification, Chandel district police said the liquor allegedly consumed by the victims had been procured from Sugnu in Kakching district and was neither manufactured nor brewed in Chandel. Five of the reported deaths, police added, fell under the jurisdiction of Sugnu Police Station.

The police have appealed to the public and media to refrain from circulating unverified information or drawing premature conclusions about the incident.

Meanwhile, the Chandel Deputy Commissioner issued a public health advisory on Thursday, stating that the exact cause of the deaths had not yet been established through medical and scientific investigation.

As a precautionary measure, residents have been advised to avoid locally brewed liquor and alcoholic beverages of doubtful origin, particularly those obtained from suspected sources in the affected areas, until further notice.

Two held in Cachar as police intercept truck carrying 511 bags of urea



SILCHAR

Police in Assam's Cachar district have seized 511 bags of urea fertiliser from a truck intercepted during a checking operation at Kalainchhara, arresting two persons in connection with the suspected illegal transportation.

The arrested individuals have been identified as Dinesh Roy and Sukumar Mandal.

The seizure was made during a naka checking operation when police stopped the truck and recovered the fertiliser bags. The consignment is now under investigation amid suspicions that the fertiliser may have been diverted from authorised distribution channels for sale in the illegal market.

Police are examining the origin of the consignment, the documents related to its transportation and its intended destination. Investigators are also trying to establish whether the seized fertiliser was being transported as part of a larger diversion network.The arrests have brought renewed attention to suspected irregularities in the distribution and movement of agricultural fertilisers in the district.Further details about the source of the consignment and the alleged involvement of others are awaited as the investigation continues.

10-katha land row takes legal turn, Abhijeet Pal moves against Sajjal Acharya in Silchar

KRC TIMES NEWS DESK



SILCHAR: An internal dispute within the Silchar District Congress over an alleged transfer of 10 kathas of land has escalated into a legal confrontation, with Congress leader Abhijeet Pal filing a police complaint against party colleague Sajjal Acharya and initiating a criminal defamation case.

The controversy first surfaced on October 26, when media reports and social media posts alleged that Acharya had sold 10 kathas of land to an individual identified as Joy Kumar Saha. The issue reportedly reached the state Congress leadership, prompting Pradesh Congress president Gaurav Gogoi to summon Acharya that night.

Two days later, on October 28, Acharya addressed a press conference and rejected the allegations against him. He claimed that efforts were being made to damage his reputation by holding him responsible for a land transaction involving Abhijeet Pal.

The dispute subsequently moved towards an official examination of the land records. Four Congress workers approached the Silchar Settlement Office seeking clarification on the transaction. An application was also filed under the Right to Information Act to obtain relevant land documents.

At a press conference on Friday, Pal claimed that an RTI response received on November 18 showed Sajjal Acharya's signatures on documents connected with the disputed property. He said his long association with Acharya in the Congress had enabled him to recognise the signatures.

Pal further alleged that Acharya had sought a No Objection Certificate (NOC) for transferring the 10-katha plot in exchange for money. He said he had approached Silchar Sadar Police Station to ensure that the allegations were properly investigated.

The Congress leader also demanded that Joy Kumar Saha, the alleged purchaser, and advocate Paresh Das be brought within the scope of the investigation.

Pal said documents obtained through the RTI process had been handed over to the police and assured that he would cooperate with the investigation. Alongside the police complaint, he has filed a criminal defamation case against Acharya, alleging that attempts were made to tarnish his image in connection with the controversy.

The dispute has exposed another layer of internal friction within the Silchar Congress. With the matter now involving both a police investigation and a defamation case, the focus is on the documentary evidence, the response of the accused leader and the next steps in the legal proceedings.

Fake vehicle sale affidavit lands Tripura man in jail for 10 years

AGARTALA

A court in South Tripura has sentenced a man to a total of 10 years of rigorous imprisonment for executing a forged affidavit claiming the sale of a vehicle and committing offences including cheating and criminal intimidation.

The Additional District and Sessions Judge at Sabroom convicted Suman Nath, son of Gopal Nath and a resident of Ramendra Nagar under Sabroom police station, in Criminal Appeal No. 01/2026.

According to the case records, Nath executed an affidavit before a notary public on September 6, 2021, claiming that he had sold a vehicle bearing registration number TR-08-1880 to Bidhan Dey.

However, after receiving a copy of the affidavit through Sabroom police station, Dey denied having purchased the vehicle. He alleged that the document was fraudulent and that he had been cheated and criminally intimidated.



A case was registered at Sabroom police station on October 1, 2021, under Sections 420 and 506 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Following the investigation, Sub-Inspector Prabal Deb filed a chargesheet against Nath on January 29, 2022.

The court imposed three years of rigorous imprisonment and a fine of Rs 10,000 under Section 199 of the IPC. An additional six months' imprisonment was prescribed in default of payment.

Under Section 200, Nath was sentenced to another three years of rigorous imprisonment and fined Rs 10,000, with a further six months in jail in case of non-payment.

He was also awarded one year of rigorous imprisonment under Section 417 and three years under Section 506 of the IPC.

The verdict brings the legal proceedings in the case to a close at this stage, with the court holding Nath guilty of the offences arising from the disputed vehicle sale affidavit.

Assam ranks third in public health funding, government bears 59.5% of expenditure: CM



KRC TIMES NEWS DESK

GUWAHATI: The Assam government accounts for 59.5 per cent of the state's total health expenditure, placing it third among 21 states in terms of government-funded healthcare spending in 2023-24, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on November 20.

Sharing figures attributed to the latest National Health Accounts estimates on X, Sarma said the increased government contribution had helped reduce the financial burden on households.

According to the data cited by the Chief Minister, out-of-pocket expenditure accounts for 34.8 per cent of Assam's total health spending, considerably below the national average of 42.7 per cent.

"The latest National Health Accounts estimate speaks to our efforts: the government now funds 59.5% of Assam's total health expenditure, so families spend less out of pocket," Sarma said.

The figures indicate the respective contributions of public funding and households towards overall healthcare expenditure. Assam's reported out-of-pocket share is 7.9 percentage points below the national average.

The Chief Minister highlighted the state's position as evidence of the government's efforts to strengthen public funding in healthcare and reduce direct spending by families.

However, the share of government financing alone does not establish whether healthcare has become affordable for every household. Access to public hospitals, availability of medicines, treatment quality and the actual cost of medical services remain important indicators in assessing the financial burden on patients.

The latest figures offer an indication of Assam's healthcare financing pattern in 2023-24, with the state government highlighting its comparatively higher public contribution.

Over 2,600 minors die by suicide in Assam in six years; experts flag gaps in child mental health support

GUWAHATI

More than 2,600 minors have died by suicide in Assam over the past six years, raising serious concerns about the state's child mental health support system, with experts warning that early signs of psychological distress are often overlooked at home and in schools.

The alarming figures have come into focus following a disturbing incident in Guwahati in which a Class IX student allegedly stabbed his mother before sharing details of the incident in his school WhatsApp group and subsequently dying by suicide. The incident has once again drawn attention to the growing psychological vulnerabilities among adolescents.

Official figures indicate that underage girls account for the majority of minor suicide victims in Assam. The scale of the crisis remained particularly concerning in 2025, when nearly two minors died by suicide every day across the state.

The latest figures come against the backdrop of several distressing incidents involving school-going children. In June 2026, a 14-year-old girl in Moran allegedly died by suicide following humiliation linked to a social media dispute at school. Earlier, in April, a 13-year-old girl in Rangia reportedly took her own life, alleging years of abuse.



Police sources have identified family disputes, academic pressure, peer-related conflicts and excessive engagement with online gaming as some of the factors frequently emerging in cases involving teenagers.

Mental health professionals, however, caution against viewing these incidents through isolated triggers, stressing the need to identify underlying emotional and psychological distress before it reaches a critical stage.

A Guwahati-based psychiatrist said children's mental well-being needed regular assessment both at home and in educational institutions. Parents and teachers, the psychiatrist observed, sometimes fail to recognise warning signs or underestimate the seriousness of behavioural changes among adolescents.

Other mental health professionals have pointed to rising anxiety, depression and emotional isolation among teenagers. Prolonged screen exposure, late-night mobile phone use and immersive online gaming, they said, can further aggravate existing vulnerabilities and contribute to impulsive behaviour.

The crisis also reflects a wider pattern of rising suicides across Assam. According to police data, the state recorded 3,262 suicides in 2021, followed by 3,320 in 2022. The number declined to 3,051 in 2023 before increasing to 3,203 in 2024 and reaching 3,477 in 2025.

This translates into an average of nearly 10 suicide deaths every day in the state during 2025. Hanging was reported as the predominant method in most cases.

Experts believe that addressing the growing number of suicides among minors requires a stronger institutional response rather than relying solely on crisis intervention after an incident.

They have called for full-time counsellors in schools, regular psychological assessments, greater awareness among teachers and stronger communication between parents and children. They also stressed the importance of monitoring children's digital engagement while ensuring that they have a safe environment to discuss emotional difficulties.

With thousands of young lives lost over the past six years, mental health professionals warn that the absence of accessible counselling and early intervention could leave many vulnerable children without the support they urgently need.

Quest!

For a million years, the population of humans was less than 26,000.



NATIONAL

Two Punjabi-origin MLAs inducted into British Columbia Cabinet; four named parliamentary secretaries



CHANDIGARH

Two Indian-origin MLAs hailing from Punjab have been elevated in the cabinet of British Columbia Premier Lorne Doerkson government in Canada.

Jessy Sahota has been appointed British Columbia's new Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General, while Harman Bhangu has been named Minister of State for Labour and four other Punjab-origin legislators have been appointed parliamentary secretaries.

South Asian-origin MLA Zeeshan Wahla was sworn in as Minister of State for Housing. The appointments were announced after Doerkson took oath as British Columbia's 38th Premier on Friday. He unveiled his Cabinet at a ceremony held at Government House in Victoria.

The four Indian-origin MLAs from Punjab have been appointed parliamentary secretaries are Mandeep Dhaliwal from Surrey North (Sport and Culture), Harj Dhaliwal from Surrey-Newton (TransLink), Jody Toor (Tourism) and Steve Kooner (Insurance Corporation of British Columbia). Surrey emerged with strong representation in the new government, with six of the city's 10 MLAs securing cabinet or parliamentary secretary roles.

Surrey-Serpentine River MLA Jessy Sahota and Surrey City Centre MLA Zeeshan Wahla both joined cabinet, while parliamentary secretary posts went to Harj Dhaliwal, Mandeep Singh Dhaliwal, Surrey-Panorama MLA Bryan Tepper (Urban Policing), and Surrey South MLA Megan Knight (Metro Vancouver).

The appointments follow the October 24 provincial elections, in which the Conservative Party, under Doerkson's leadership, secured a majority, ending nine consecutive years of BC NDP rule.

Last month 14 Indian-origin candidates hailing from Punjab have been elected to the 44th British Columbia provincial assembly in Canada, matching the number of Punjab-origin MLAs in the outgoing house.

The Conservatives had won 64 of the 93 seats in the Legislative Assembly, while the BC NDP secured 27 seats and the Green Party won two. The estimated voter turnout was 52 per cent, with around 1.95 million people participating in the election.

100 days since Monsoon session, PM, HM still seeking 'supertainted' majority for delimitation bill: Congress



NEW DELHI

The Congress on Saturday said that even 100 days after the Monsoon session of Parliament was adjourned sine die, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah continued to seek a "supertainted" two-thirds majority in the Lok Sabha to push through the delimitation bill.

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said it is in the nation's interest to let the current Lok Sabha strength and state-wise configuration continue with one-third reservation for women implemented till the Viksit Bharat objective is achieved.

"Today is the 100th day since the 2026 Monsoon Session of Parliament was adjourned sine die and has not been prorogued.

"The PM-HM jodi is still in search of a supertainted two-thirds majority in the Lok Sabha to get the Constitutional Amendment Bill on Delimitation passed," he said in a post on X.

The Congress leader said that nobody knows what the new Bill will contain since the old Bill was defeated "resoundingly" on April 17.

He said no new specific proposals have been discussed with any political party "in a serious and structured manner", and added that an all-party meeting has not been called, "despite four letters to the PM from Mallikarjun Kharge".

"There are far more serious and pressing economic, political, social, military and foreign policy challenges that await and demand attention. Far-reaching and comprehensive Delimitation can wait. Indira Gandhi put it off for 25 years in 1976. In 2001, Atal Bihari Vajpayee put it off for a further twenty-five years, that is, till the results of the first census after 2026 are published. They were wise and nationalist PMs," Ramesh said in his post.

He recalled that the Prime Minister expressed grave concerns about the state of the economy at the FICCI conclave on November 19.

"He seems to be in a very disturbed state of mind, as indeed he should be. Debate and discussions on delimitation require cool heads unburdened by tensions of the type that are preoccupying the PM. Extensive consultations with various stakeholders are also needed. "Under the circumstances, it is in the nation's interest to let the current Lok Sabha strength and state-wise configuration continue with one-third reservation for women implemented. This arrangement should then remain frozen till the much-trumpeted Viksit Bharat objective is achieved. It will be a fitting tribute to it since the consequences of a fundamentally new delimitation can best be managed in an environment when Viksit Bharat has become a reality," the Congress leader said.

INTERNATIONAL

China's nuclear buildup is 'hot and heavy,' Trump says a day after meeting with Xi

WASHINGTON



Beijing is building nuclear weapons at a "hot and heavy" pace, President Donald Trump said Friday, a day after he met Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin and the three countries agreed to talks on preventing nuclear proliferation.

While Russia and the U.S. lead the world by each possessing thousands of nuclear weapons, China is rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal. In its annual review of China's military buildup, the Pentagon said China's stockpile of nuclear warheads remained in the low 600s through 2024, but the country was on track to have more than 1,000 warheads by 2030.

"They'll catch us within 10 years," Trump said of China's nuclear buildup during a news conference at the White House. "They're going at it hot and heavy, but they have a lot."

Trump's public remarks were his first since his controversial summit with Xi and Putin, leaders of countries long considered U.S. rivals, in the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen on Thursday. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who spoke to reporters alongside Trump on Friday, said it was imperative for the three nuclear powers to talk.

"These three countries possess the overwhelming majority of nuclear weapons on this planet," Rubio said. "The idea that these three leaders should not engage on a regular basis is not just absurd, it's dangerous."

After the trilateral meeting, the leaders issued a joint statement, saying they "affirmed that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought" and "will conduct a dialogue on reducing nuclear risks and preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons."

Prior to the meeting, observers had doubted that China would agree to nuclear talks. With a much smaller nuclear arsenal, Beijing had resisted joining nuclear arms control talks with the U.S. and Russia.

Experts believe it is a positive sign that the three leaders intended to avoid nuclear war. "This statement is far from meaningful arms control. But it's still a reasonable down payment on stability," wrote Erin D. Dumbacher, director of the Defense and National Security Program at the Council on Foreign Relations.

The Chinese Embassy didn't immediately respond to a request for comment. Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said in July that Beijing keeps "its nuclear capabilities at the minimum level required for safeguarding national security" and "does not engage in any form of nuclear arms race."

Trump says he and Xi spoke about AI safeguards and Jensen Huang

Aside from nuclear security, Trump said he and Xi also agreed to "do some joint guardrails" on artificial intelligence but offered no details. The agreement comes as warnings grow about the potential for the rapidly developing technology to cause catastrophic harm or even wipe out humanity.

The leaders agreed to some safeguards "because there really is no third place," Trump said, but still stressed the need for the U.S. to win the AI race. "Whoever wins, that side wins."

Ilaria Mazzocco, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington-based think tank, said it is a challenging task for the two countries to set up AI safety rules.

"It's technically difficult, trust is very low, and geopolitically there's not a lot of incentive in agreeing to doing anything that might restrict your own capabilities if you don't believe your competitor will also do it," she said.

Trump said he also brought up Jensen Huang, the co-founder of the U.S. chipmaker Nvidia, saying the Chinese leader agreed that Huang was "a brilliant man." Critical in the AI race is access to advanced computing chips made by companies such as Nvidia.

To maintain a competitive edge, the U.S. bans sales of the country's most advanced chips to China.

Huang resigned this month over his ties with a former Chinese executive of a Singapore-based company suspected of diverting Nvidia chips to China. She has been accused of being a Chinese government agent, which Beijing denies.

Huang "put us in a position where we are literally 10 years advanced over other companies," Trump said, suggesting that the Nvidia co-founder should be given a second chance.

"I think the company, if they were smart, they take that brilliant man, accept an apology and let him go back to work," the president said.

The Trump administration this week issued new rules to restrict remote access to advanced chips and servers.

Trump said there was "great electricity" when he met Xi and Putin, noting that "the relationship was fantastic between the three of us."

Trump said he gets along with the leaders of both Russia and China, suggesting that his good relationship with Xi was the reason China has pulled back from its influence efforts in Latin America. The Trump administration has vowed to restore U.S. predominance in the Western Hemisphere.

"They were nibbling on the edge of Venezuela, and I asked them to leave, and they left," Trump said of China. "They were very much involved with the Panama Canal, and I said, you have to leave."

Trump says Russia also had influence over the South American country, whose then-leader, Nicolás Maduro, was captured by U.S. forces in January. "Russia was very much involved with Venezuela. They're not there anymore, and China is not there anymore," Trump said. "But we are."

Young protesters hit the streets across Europe over high living costs, climate crises

FRANKFURT



Protesters rallied across Europe on Friday to vent anger over issues from high living costs to military spending and the climate crisis, ramping up pressure on political leaders they accuse of ignoring the concerns of young people.

Demonstrators hit the streets in cities from Italy to Germany, Switzerland and Britain, many waving signs emblazoned with "fight for our future", setting off flares and burning cardboard models of tanks.

The rallies, coordinated by a youth-led coalition of over 50 groups, are fuelled by grievances that vary from place to place, including Israel's war in Gaza, high rents and deteriorating learning conditions at schools and universities. But a common theme runs through them -- a sense that governments across the continent are too busy with geopolitical crises and helping big business, and not investing enough in the well-being of younger generations. Olivia Ferrario, an 18-year-old high school student at a protest in the Italian city of Milan, told AFP that young people were displaying their "dynamism and determination" by taking to the streets. "If the government does not listen to us, we cannot remain silent," she said at the demonstration that attracted tens of thousands of protesters.

Police deployed in large numbers due to fears of a repeat of the street violence that has marred recent major protests in France and other countries.

- 'Lost so much hope' -

In Switzerland, organisers claimed that more than 40,000 protesters had taken to the streets nationwide.

"Austerity is social violence," read a banner in Lausanne, while another blared: "Be vegan, but eat the rich."

The demonstrations were mostly peaceful. But a small number of people clashed with police after it ended, resulting in the deployment of tear gas and water cannon, the domestic Keystone-ATS news agency reported.

In Berlin, about 1,000 university students and school pupils protested over concerns including Germany's rapid rearmament, which has stoked fears of a return to compulsory military service.

"I simply think it's indefensible... to force someone to learn how to fight and kill, and then send them to war," Helena Kossatz, 18, who finished high school last year, told .

While Europe seeks to rearm in the face of a hostile Russia, organisers of the continent-wide protests say funds allocated to rearmament should be spent on education, youth policies and housing. Several hundred protesters, some in school uniform, gathered at demonstrations in London outside parliament and in nearby Trafalgar Square, waving placards that said "save higher education" and "Fight for our futures not their wars".

"I've lost so much hope," Eliz, who had taken the day off from college and gave only one name, told . The 18-year-old said she was unsure whether she would go to university, "because of money. Because most jobs are getting taken over by AI. Everyone's just kind of more depressed".

There were scuffles between groups of right-wing and anti-fascist demonstrators, and AFP saw a handful of arrests.

Chants of "Palestine will live forever" rang out at the London protests, and Palestinian flags were on display at several of the demonstrations across Europe.

In Rome, high school students marched behind a banner that read: "We will take freedom if no one gives it to us -- against the government, the war and the high cost of living."

There were scuffles in the Italian capital, with some protesters throwing bottles and smoke bombs at police.

Demonstrators called for more funding for education and railed against increased military spending during protests in the Spanish capital Madrid.

Gabriela Gimeno Serrano, a 16-year-old high school student, said there were 33 students in her class with just one teacher.

"Classrooms are very small, the facilities are in an absolutely dreadful state," she told AFP, adding some schools were even plagued by rats and cockroaches. Protests are set to extend into the weekend, with trade unions and housing associations calling for further demonstrations. The protests come around the anniversary of the Yellow Vests movement in France, which rattled President Emmanuel Macron in 2018 and 2019. Demonstrations are planned there on Saturday.

The protests in European countries have in part been inspired by recent demonstrations in France, which have sometimes turned violent.

Those began when students demonstrated at high schools in mid-September to demand better learning conditions, fuelling a nationwide campaign against soaring prices, inadequate public services and police brutality.

Tea, Bungalows and the Wild Memories of an Anglo-Indian childhood in Assam's tea gardens

GEOFFREY FARNHAM



A World Between Tea and Forest

Assam's tea gardens have long been associated with plantations, managers' bungalows, labour lines, clubs and the rhythms of estate life. Yet, for those who grew up among the tea bushes, they were also places of extraordinary natural beauty: dense forests, winding roads, elephants, birds, rivers and wildlife. For one Anglo-Indian family, the tea gardens of Assam were not merely a workplace. They were home.

This is a personal recollection of that world, seen through the childhood memories of Geoffrey Farnham, whose father, David William Farnham, was among the last British tea planters in Assam. It is also a tribute to E.P. Gee, a British-born naturalist whose work helped change the way India understood and protected its wildlife.

E.P. Gee: From Tea Planter to Conservationist

Edward Pritchard Gee, better known as E.P. Gee, arrived in Assam's Golaghat district as an assistant manager at Doyang Tea Estate. Like many planters of his generation, he began his career within the colonial tea industry. Unlike many, however, he became one of India's most important early wildlife conservationists.

Gee eventually became manager of the estate and lived in its bungalow until his retirement. But his lasting contribution lay beyond tea. At a time when hunting was often regarded as a normal part of planter life, Gee helped represent a major shift: from the hunter-shooter to the careful observer and protector of wildlife.

He is credited with the discovery of the golden langur, a striking primate found along the Assam-Bhutan border. He also played an important role in the campaign to upgrade Kaziranga from a game sanctuary into a wildlife sanctuary. Gee even guided Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru through Kaziranga on elephant back, helping bring national attention to the park and its remarkable wildlife.

Gee wrote the classic book *Wildlife of India*, for which Nehru wrote the foreword. Beyond conservation, he was deeply connected to local society. He served as an honorary lecturer in English at Debraj Roy College in Golaghat and contributed to local schools and religious institutions, including the Namghar at Kunwari Village.

After retiring from the tea gardens, Gee chose to remain in the North East and settled in Shillong, then the capital of undivided Assam, at a residence known as Green Cottage. Although he died in London, his heart remained in the riverine forests of the Brahmaputra.

Gee's life reminds us that the tea planters of the North East were not only industry pioneers. Some became early scientific observers of the region's extraordinary biodiversity, helping lay the foundations for the conservation movement that followed.

A Childhood Among Tea Bushes

My father, David William Farnham, was a well-known name in tea circles and one of the last British tea planters in Assam. After completing his short-service commission in the British Army, he joined the tea industry in the 1950s.

At that time, many British and Scottish managing agency houses operated primarily from Calcutta and London, managing tea gardens across Assam. Names such as James Finlay, James Warren, Gillanders, Walter Goodricke and Duncans, Balmer Lawrie and Octavius Steel were familiar throughout the industry. Many continued to play an important role until the 1960s.

My father was also a keen sportsman, excelling at rugby and football. Many people connected with the tea industry in the Dooars and Assam during the 1950s to 1970s would remember his sporting ability.

My mother was an Indian woman from Assam, and I was born in 1972 in a tea garden near Tezpur in Sonitpur district. That makes me a first-generation Anglo-Indian. I was later sent to boarding school in Shillong, but my childhood remained deeply rooted in the tea gardens.

I grew up surrounded by tea bushes, colonial bungalows, estate staff, traditional khana-pinas prepared by trained cooks, clubs and even elephant rides. Some gardens kept elephants for estate work. I fondly remember riding an elephant to the Borsola Club near our garden during the Christmas and New Year season.

Wildlife at the Doorstep

Wildlife was abundant in those days. Chinese ferret badgers, pygmy hogs and a wide variety of birds were frequently seen. Around our bungalow stood a few betel nut trees, or areca palms, where weaver birds built their nests from dawn to dusk, chirping continuously.

Tea garden workers sometimes brought us unexpected surprises: a large python, or an almost-white owl that may have been an Eastern Grass Owl. Jackals, foxes, tigers and leopards were not unusual sights. Flora and fauna thrived, and life often seemed like a scene from Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*.

Returning to the garden bungalow from boarding school for the holidays was always eagerly awaited. My parents kept two chowkidars to guard the ripening lychees from birds so that we children could enjoy the fruit ourselves.

My brothers and I would feast on lychees with such enthusiasm that we often ended up suffering from hot boils after overeating. It was a small price to pay for one of the great pleasures of a tea-garden childhood.

The Elephant in Musth

One memory remains particularly vivid. I once saw an aggressive and restless wild makhna—a tuskless adult male elephant—in musth. With testosterone levels at their peak, the elephant approached our bungalow, breaking branches and attempting to topple a tea-shade tree.

It was a frightening and unforgettable sight. I was fortunate to witness such a powerful moment of wild nature so close to home. Only now, with the passage of time, do I fully understand how rare and extraordinary such experiences were.

A Hundred Elephants at Dusk

In the early 1980s, my family—my father, mother, two brothers and I—was returning home to our garden from Tezpur town. At that time, Tezpur was the district headquarters of Darrang district. In 1983, when Darrang was bifurcated, Tezpur became the headquarters of Sonitpur district.

We were running late, and dusk was settling in. My father decided to take a shortcut near the outer division of our main garden. We had to cross a kachcha road; most garden roads were unpaved in those days, although many have since been paved.

The road was flanked by dense Assam jungle on both sides. Our Mahindra jeep's headlights cut through the darkness of the narrow road. Suddenly, my father had to stop. A herd of elephants—no fewer than a hundred, of different sizes and ages—was crossing the road.

It felt as though time had stood still. We watched, captivated, as the herd moved unhurriedly across the road: majestic, graceful and entirely indifferent to our presence. Elephants are often more active after dark, when the air is cooler and human activity is reduced.

The sight was exhilarating, but also a little frightening. We waited patiently until the last elephant, a large adult male, had crossed. Only then did we continue our journey. Although we were late, the memory of that magnificent spectacle remains priceless—one that money simply cannot buy.

Golden Frogs and Sunday Rides

On another occasion, I was fortunate enough to see hundreds of male Indian bullfrogs resting beside a pond within the tea estate. During the breeding season, these frogs turn a brilliant yellow. I watched them basking in the afternoon sun, their skins shimmering with a golden sheen. It was a truly magical sight.

I am grateful to my father, who often took me along on his Rajdoot motorcycle during his Sunday afternoon outings. He loved motorcycles because they could take him into the remote corners of the tea garden, places that four-wheel-drive vehicles could not reach. In fact, he rode a motorcycle until the age of 74.

There were no mobile phones then, and cameras were brought out only on special occasions. What a pity that a photograph could not have captured that moment forever.

A Life Worth Remembering

In short, this was the typical Anglo-Indian life in an Assam tea garden—quite different from the Anglo-Indian experience elsewhere. It was a life of tea, bungalows, clubs, servants, trained cooks, boarding schools, sports, wildlife, elephants, Christmas celebrations, family and the timeless rhythm of the Assam tea country.

It was also a life closely connected to the land. The forests, rivers, birds and animals were not distant attractions. They were part of everyday life, sometimes beautiful, sometimes dangerous, and always unforgettable.

Men such as E.P. Gee helped ensure that this extraordinary world would be seen not merely as a backdrop to plantation life, but as a natural inheritance worth understanding and protecting. Today, as Assam continues to balance development, agriculture and conservation, those early connections between people, tea and wildlife remain an important part of its story.

I loved those good old days of tea life—and I am grateful that their memory remains so vivid.

— Geoffrey Farnham, Assam, India

About the Author

Geoffrey Farnham is a first-generation Anglo-Indian who was born in an Assam tea garden near Tezpur in 1972. His father, David William Farnham, was a British tea planter in Assam and the Dooars. Geoffrey's writing draws on his childhood memories of tea-garden life, wildlife and the Anglo-Indian community of North East India.

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MAY-NOV 2026

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– Anne Frank

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