GEOPOLITICS

THE SIANG PROJECT AND CHINA'S MEDOG DAM: WHY INDIA NEEDS ITS OWN RESERVOIR

By **Kamlesh Bhagatkar**, *Politician, Author & Geopolitical Analyst · 22 November 2026*

Union Home Minister Amit Shah went to Arunachal Pradesh on Saturday, 21 November, and spoke about the Siang project, a hydropower plan that has brought protests to the Siang valley. At the Police Training Centre in Banderdewa, near Itanagar, where he presented the President's Police Colour to the Arunachal Pradesh Police, he addressed the people of the Siang valley directly. "We will find a way forward through positive dialogue... You need not worry about it," he said, as reported by ETV Bharat. "We will move forward without compromising the traditions, culture and religion of this place."

The project is the proposed 11,200 MW Siang Upper Multipurpose Project, known as SUMP. Shah described it as important for Arunachal's development, for national energy security, for the state's revenue and for India's strategic interests, according to both ETV Bharat and Ommcom News. He promised that the Union government would offer what Ommcom reported as "the most attractive rehabilitation package in India", and said local people should take up their concerns with the state government and, through it, with the Ministry of Home Affairs.

His words came a day after two local organisations asked him to scrap the project altogether. The Adi Ba:né Kébang United and the Siang Indigenous Farmers' Forum sent him a joint memorandum on Friday, PTI reported through ThePrint. They want work on the pre-feasibility report stopped, detained protesters released, cases against them withdrawn, a judicial inquiry into violence in Siang district on 23 October, central forces moved out of Upper Siang and Siang districts, and a clear assurance that nothing will go ahead without public consent.

So the Union government and the people of the valley are now speaking to each other in public, which is better than speaking past each other. I want to set out why I think this project matters to Bharat, and why winning over the people of Siang is part of that national interest.

What China is building upstream

The Siang is the name the Yarlung Tsangpo takes when it enters India from Tibet. Downstream in Assam it becomes the Brahmaputra, and in Bangladesh the Jamuna.

On 19 July 2025, Chinese Premier Li Qiang announced the start of construction of a hydropower project on the lower reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo, as China calls the river, at a ceremony in Nyingchi, according to Xinhua as carried by China Daily. The project has five cascade hydropower stations and a total investment of about 1.2 trillion yuan, roughly 167 billion US dollars. A new state company, China Yajiang Group, was set up to run it. Al Jazeera reported that the project was approved in December 2024 and lies about 30 km from the disputed border with India. Arunachal's Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein put its reported capacity at 60,000 MW, according to The Pioneer.

Beijing says India has nothing to fear. In December 2024, China's foreign ministry said the project would have no "negative impact" downstream and that China would keep communicating with countries on the lower reaches, Al Jazeera reported. India's response was careful. The Ministry of External Affairs said India would "monitor and take necessary measures to protect our interests", and that China "has been urged to ensure that the interests of the downstream states of the Brahmaputra are not harmed by activities in upstream areas."

In August 2025, Minister of State for External Affairs Kirti Vardhan Singh told the Rajya Sabha that "the government carefully monitors all developments related to the Brahmaputra River", The Tribune reported. He said the resumption of hydrological data from the Chinese side was raised during the External Affairs Minister's visit to China from 14 to 16 July 2025, and that such issues are discussed through an Expert Level Mechanism set up in 2006.

To me, that last point says the most. India has to ask China to resume sharing river data. A neighbour that treats flood data as something it can switch on and off is a neighbour whose assurances need a backstop.

What the Siang project is meant to do

The case for SUMP rests on storage. Mein said on 5 October that the project is "primarily aimed at storing and managing water in the Siang basin", with a dam about 280 to 300 metres high and about 9.2 billion cubic metres of live storage, The Pioneer reported. "Water storage and regulation function is central to SUMP's larger purpose," he said. He described the Medog dam as built mainly for hydropower, with a storage of 5.5 billion cubic metres.

Chief Minister Pema Khandu made the same argument on 16 November, at a National Press Day programme. He called SUMP "a strategic necessity for India's water security and defence", Outlook reported, and said its main aim is to regulate and monitor upstream flows and shield people

downstream, with power generation second. He cited the same 9.2 billion cubic metres for Siang against a reported 5.2 billion cubic metres for the Chinese project. The two leaders give slightly different figures for Medog, but both put India's planned reservoir well above China's.

Outlook also reported that SUMP was declared a national project in 2008 and made little progress for years, and that Khandu put the proposed investment at nearly ₹2 lakh crore.

I find the strategic logic sound. If an upstream power can hold back water in a dry season or release a surge during the monsoon, a downstream country needs room of its own to absorb the shock. A large reservoir on our side of the border gives India that room, and it gives our negotiators something more than requests when they sit across from Chinese officials. The InfoPack that prompted this piece makes the same case: water security, flood moderation and clean power in one project.

Bangladesh, further downstream, has a stake in this too, since what India stores or releases on the Siang will in time reach the Jamuna.

Why the valley is not yet convinced

The objections are serious, and they come from the people who would live with the dam.

The two organisations told Shah that earlier state governments rejected the project twice after public opposition, and that it was revived in 2024 without proper consultation, according to PTI. They say work on the pre-feasibility report began without telling villagers about rehabilitation, alternative farmland or livelihoods. They allege that on 23 October central forces, including the Rapid Action Force, used tear gas and stun grenades on protesters in Siang district, and that youths were arrested on fabricated charges. These are their allegations; I have not seen an official account that settles what happened that day. Khandu, for his part, condemned the destruction of houses, farmland and water-supply facilities during the protests and called for an investigation, Outlook reported.

The groups also say they are not against hydropower and would prefer smaller dams. They fear displacement, the loss of ancestral land and the destruction of forests. The memo of the InfoPack itself points to the fragile Himalayan ecology and the lives of communities along the Siang valley.

The memorandum also points to mixed signals at the top: it says Khandu has indicated the dam will not be built without public consent, while the local MP has suggested it will go ahead regardless. Mixed signals of this kind feed fear in the villages.

Khandu has admitted part of the problem. He said the government had not explained the project well enough at the grassroots, and that committees have since been set up to engage community, student and youth bodies. He called the pre-feasibility report "only an initial exercise" and said villages do not need to sign agreements to permit it. Mein said the same in October: the project has not reached a final construction decision. Khandu also said the number of villages affected, and the extent of the

backwaters, can only be known after detailed feasibility studies and social and environmental impact assessments. And he said: "People are free to oppose or support the project, but no one should face intimidation or coercion."

What India must get right

In my view, India needs storage on the Siang, and it needs the people of the Siang valley to want it. These two aims do not pull against each other. A dam on our frontier that is built over the heads of the people who live there would be a gift to anyone who wants to tell a story about Delhi and the Northeast. A dam built with them, on terms they accept, would make the frontier stronger in every sense.

That means a few concrete things. The studies Khandu mentioned should be done properly and their findings shared in plain language, in the valley, before any final decision. The rehabilitation package Shah promised should be written down and made public, so families can judge it for themselves. The 23 October events deserve a credible inquiry, whatever form it takes, because trust will not come while that day is unexplained. And the message from Itanagar and New Delhi should be one message.

China has spent heavily and moved fast upstream. India's answer should be just as determined, but it has a different strength to draw on. We are a democracy, and the people of Siang are citizens with a voice. Shah has now said publicly that the way forward will be found through dialogue. The organisations have said they are willing to talk on equal terms, though not under the shadow of armed security.

I have written before about how China has made our northern border "more alive", including in Arunachal. Water is part of the same contest. And as our own decision on the Indus Waters Treaty shows, the country upstream holds real leverage.

What to watch

Watch whether the dialogue Shah promised actually begins, who sits at the table, and whether the security deployment in Upper Siang and Siang districts is scaled down before it does. Watch whether the state government responds to the demand for a judicial inquiry into 23 October. Watch whether the rehabilitation package is published. And watch the pre-feasibility report: whether work resumes, and whether its findings are shared with the villages it concerns.

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