

# Pope Leo in Trump's Board of Peace could mean centuries of 'positive neutrality' compromised

Pope Leo XIV is among the world leaders invited to join Donald Trump's "Board of Peace". Initially aimed at ending the conflict in Gaza, Trump says it will also resolve conflicts globally. The Vatican's secretary of state has said the pope needs time to consider whether to take part.

Leo, the first pope from the United States, forcefully decried conditions in Gaza in a Christmas Eve address. He has told journalists that the only solution to the conflict is a Palestinian state. But the Vatican has long described its foreign policy as "positive neutrality".

Formal membership of state-sponsored commissions has usually been avoided by the Holy See, the central government of the Catholic Church, which has diplomatic relations with 184 countries, plus the European Union and the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, as well as a permanent observer status at the United Nations.

Across nearly two millennia, popes have been deeply involved in peace efforts. They have mediated disputes, facilitated negotiations, opened humanitarian corridors and applied moral pressure to restrain violence. Yet they have almost always done so from the sidelines: carefully positioned close enough to influence outcomes, but far enough away to preserve credibility with all parties.

Papal peacemaking has worked best when the pope could speak to everyone, even those who rejected the political order of the day. Neutrality is not a rhetorical posture, but a practical asset: hard-won and easily lost.

Can the papacy maintain independent authority in an increasingly polarised world?

## Influence without command

The Holy See has no army, no coercive economic power and no capacity to enforce compliance. What it has possessed, in varying degrees across time, is moral authority, diplomatic reach and access to networks

that cross borders, ideologies and regimes.

In late antiquity, popes intervened at moments of acute danger, relying on prestige and symbolic authority rather than force. Pope Leo I's encounter with Attila the Hun in 452, near Mantua in northern Italy, illustrates this approach. The pope's message of peace persuaded the ruler of the Huns not to destroy Rome.

The episode captured a durable pattern. Papal influence worked through persuasion, reputation and the claim to speak in the name of a higher moral order.

Between the 10th and 14th centuries, the Peace of God and Truce of God movements sought to limit who could be attacked, when fighting was permitted and how warfare should be conducted. These were not state treaties, but moral frameworks, designed to protect the vulnerable. The church established the right to asylum by proclaiming immunity from violence for those who could not defend themselves.

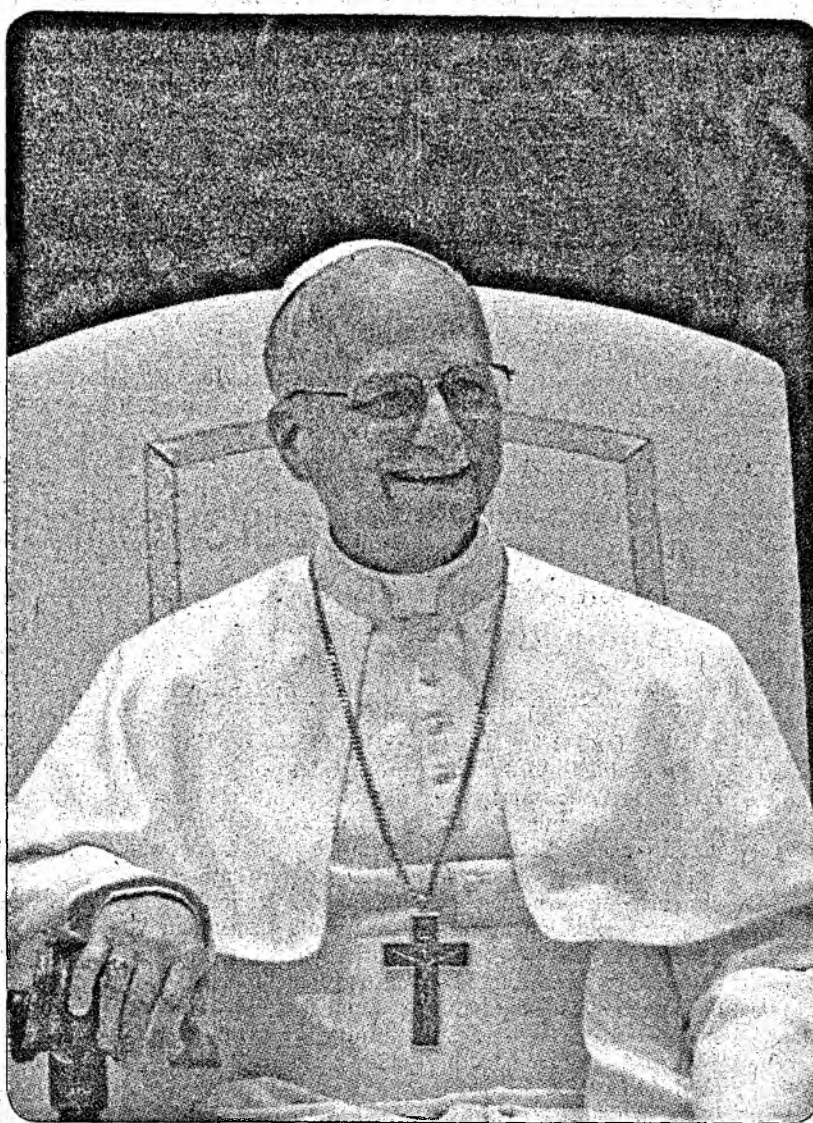
As medieval diplomacy matured, popes increasingly acted as mediators between rulers. Though the pope was never a neutral observer in a theological sense, he could function as a neutral broker in political terms, precisely because he was not a competing territorial power.

Mediation lowered the cost of compromise by allowing rulers to frame concessions as obedience to moral authority rather than weakness before an enemy.

## Neutrality as modern strength

The early modern period expanded the ambition and limits of papal peacemaking. In 1493, Pope Alexander VI drew up boundaries for Spain and Portugal's colonisation of non-Christian lands. Other European powers increasingly rejected the pope's authority to allocate sovereignty beyond Christendom.

In 1518, Pope Leo X promoted a general peace among central European Christian rulers, resulting in the Treaty of London. But a century later, the region's Thirty Years' War



was one of the longest and most destructive conflicts in European history. After it ended, European diplomacy became more overtly secular. While the pope could create peace architecture, he could not sustain it once political incentives shifted.

For 1,114 years, popes ruled as absolute monarchs over the Italian territories known as the Papal States, strategically located in central Italy. With their loss, completed in 1870, the pope gained a different kind of

leverage.

In the late 19th century, the Holy See aligned itself with emerging legal approaches to peace, including arbitration and international adjudication. It endorsed mechanisms that restrained unilateral force. Neutrality was no longer a defensive posture, but an active diplomatic resource.

## Moral authority in total war

The First World War tested the limits of that resource. Pope Bene-

dict XV confronted industrialised mass conflict, in which moral appeals struggled to gain traction. His peace proposal of August 1 1917, outlined principles that would later become familiar: disarmament, arbitration, freedom of the seas and territorial restitution. Governments acknowledged the initiative, but largely rejected its premises.

While unsuccessful, Benedict XV's intervention reinforced a papal vision of peace grounded in law and justice, rather than domination. It entrenched the Holy See's role as a humanitarian actor, supporting prisoners of war, refugees and civilian relief — even when diplomatic leverage was minimal.

During the Second World War, Pope Pius XII adopted a similar posture. His 1939 radio appeal warned that war would destroy everything peace could preserve. Throughout the conflict, the Holy See relied on discreet diplomacy and humanitarian networks. Its capacity to mediate was constrained, but its credibility as a channel of communication endured.

In the early nuclear age, successive popes increasingly addressed the ethical implications of weapons capable of annihilation. The emphasis shifted toward global norms, restraint and the need for institutions capable of preventing catastrophe.

## Speaking to the world

That shift became explicit in the United Nations era. When Pope Paul VI addressed the UN General Assembly on October 4 1965, his message was not tied to any state interest. "Never again war," he urged, framing peace as a universal moral obligation rather than a diplomatic bargain.

This has defined much modern papal diplomacy. The Holy See acts through agenda-setting, moral language and support for multilateral norms. It rarely produces treaties directly, but shapes the terms in which peace and war are debated.

At times, however, the papacy

has returned to hands-on mediation. The Beagle Channel dispute between Argentina and Chile in 1978 brought the two states close to war. Both accepted papal mediation, culminating in the 1984 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Its conditions were consent from both parties, trust in neutrality and a willingness to frame compromise as honourable rather than humiliating.

More recently, Pope Francis was involved in the restoration of diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba, announced on December 17 2014. Symbolic gestures, such as Francis kneeling before South Sudan's rival leaders in April 2019, reinforced his role as a moral catalyst rather than a governing authority.

## Why this invitation is different

Against this long history, Trump's "Board of Peace" stands out. It is not an ad hoc mediation effort, nor a quiet facilitation role requested by all parties. It is a formally constituted, state-led body, with clear political ownership and governance ambitions. Membership would signal alignment with a specific national framework.

Accepting a seat on such a board might offer influence over humanitarian access, reconstruction priorities and the protection of civilians. It could give the Holy See a voice inside a process that will shape lives on the ground.

But the risks are equally real.

Formal participation could narrow the pope's room to manoeuvre, making it harder to engage actors who distrust the board's sponsor. It could blur the line between moral authority and political endorsement.

Joining a state-led board could increase short-term influence, but at the possible cost of long-term credibility. And once neutrality is perceived to be compromised, it is difficult to restore. (The Conversation)

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## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, FEBRUARY 1, 2026

### 'Birthday Forecast'

Moon trine Saturn on your solar return chart and it is going to be a very good year for you. It will turn out to be an amazing year. You will appear far more assured and wiser. You will enjoy your work. The projects that you have been thinking of getting completed would see the light of the day. You would be man with the Midas touch. You will be able to win a big order for your concern. Your name and fame will spread far and wide. People will start taking notice of you. And you will be able to convince them too. You would be invited to social gatherings and new contracts would be developed. You will have numerous business opportunities too. A female person might prove lucky for you and may be a source of comfort. Your brothers/sisters would support you and will be a source of inspiration. Financial position would be good.

### 'This week for you'

**Aries : (March 21 - April 20)** You will be having wonderful financial gains. You would also like to spend as much as you want to. But don't go overboard. Spend at right places at the right things. Save for rainy days too. An important work will get finalized. This will increase your popularity. You would also like to make a will or testimony of your assets and property. Property related division will be accomplished with the help of experts. Your siblings will be happier. You will also make plans to buy a new vehicle. Your partner will remain a pillar of strength. Family circumstances will be to your satisfaction. You will also make necessary changes to your house, office and shop. Those who are unmarried will get ready to tie the knot.

**Taurus : (April 21 - May 21)** The time is favorable for you. You will have financial gains. You will also make progress in your job. You will look after your children and friends well and will reach out to them. You will have lot of love and respect for your parents and elders. You will also feel proud of learning something new at your workplace. You will also get favorable results in competitive exams. You will also get loan to expand your business, and you will also be able to return it on time. You will have good understanding with your bosses and subordinates. There will be an increase in your income. The doors to new possibilities will open. You will also try to move ahead by clearing all hurdles.

**Gemini : (May 22 - June 21)** A change of luck and fortunes seems imminent. You will be a cause of jealousy of some of your colleagues. But this is not your problem. You will be normal and perform your duties. You will accomplish daily tasks with great ease and get the help of family and other people. You will be full of energy. These are property gaining days. You will also prepare to undertake new responsibilities. You will have capacity and confidence to bring tasks to conclusion. But before doing any work, do the homework, only then you will be successful. You will be praised and get support in full steam, and you will feel better. You will achieve your objectives. Ties in family will improve.

**Cancer : (June 22 - July 22)** This is the right time to develop contacts. You will have financial gains. People in the family will live with mutual love and respect. Visitors will come to your house, and it will create a vibrant atmosphere. Some of your tensions will get removed. You will also look after your children like good guardians. You will also plan for your child's future. The path to progress is also bright. You will accept a new responsibility. You will also get expected help from friends and colleagues. You will be very humble and soft with your relationship. You will have little tension in family matters. Think before taking a decision. A meeting with an inspirational person will open the doors of progress for you.

**Leo : (July 23 - August 23)** There will be gains in your business/profession. Your prestige will also increase. You will be busy with amassing amenities. You will also get the best of everything. Your responsibilities will increase. You will be successful in whatever you do. You will also meet old friends. On meeting whom your old memories will be revived and you will share your feelings. Your mind will be satisfied. You will develop a capacity to remain happy. But you need not tell such truths that should not be revealed. You will be victorious in everything. The happiness of winning will reflect in your face. You will spend time with your family. Get your routine checkups done. Money will be inflow.

**Virgo : (August 24 - September 22)** You will feel happy and prosperous. You will also be busy with social activities. The responsibility of work and family notwithstanding you will manage the situation well. Happiness will radiate from house. You will have good

relationship with your partner. You will concentrate on better lifestyle without stress. Property related disputes will be solved. Old memories will be refreshed with some old friends. You will be more ambitious and will make a deep analysis of your own self and the world. Keep your character good and do not become dishonest. Efforts made to get money will be fruitful. You will find new opportunities in your career. Your business will also flourish. Husband and wife will have good relations.

**Libra : (September 23 - October 23)** It is a success granting week. And you will get victory and success in your pursuit. Your enemies may try to harm you but will not get success. You will complete business and trade related work with a serious approach. Money will flow in. You will avoid taking risks in your business. The atmosphere at home will be good. The misunderstanding between husband and wife will get resolved. You will also resolve everything at the workplace with your wisdom. You will also be praised for your work. You will also participate in some function or ceremony. You will spend more time with the family and reading some interesting or knowledge enhancing literature. The time is blissful.

**Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22)** There could be some tiff with a senior official at your workplace. This will trouble you for no reason, but you need to overcome it quickly. You may get a big order or contract from abroad. In the government-related dispute you will emerge victorious. Some religious activities or worship may keep you engrossed. In your work, you will get expected results with your humility. And with the gift of the gap you will make everyone favour you. Your family's peace and prosperity may swell. You will also give much value to your emotions to the family members and relatives. Financially you will be satisfied with your assets and progeny's educational prospects may cause you a little bit of worry.

**Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21)** You will be busy with your work. You will also be happy and in a positive frame of mind. You will also complete your daily chores with ease. Money will flow in. There will be radiance in your work, family matters and personal matters. You will have good time with your mate. You will also expand the scope of your work. Government related work will be completed. You will make maximum use of your knowledge and intelligence. There will be real peace and stability in your personal life. By helping your needy friends, you will be doing great work. Some people might neglect you, but you will keep your behavior normal. You will achieve something new that will bring happiness and peace to your life.

**Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20)** It is a favorable week for you. New opportunities are waiting for you in your career and job. You will establish an understanding with your partner and then work. You will also decide to do something new and take rest after finishing them. You will also come in close contact with your bosses, and all your work will be completed with their help. You also need to take all decisions with a lot of deliberation and care. You will have a nice time with your family members. Your partner will be a source of strength. Children will listen to you. Your property disputes will also get resolved. Some new projects will be initiated. You will also get good news from somewhere.

**Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18)** Your bosses will praise your work. Your meeting with an influential person will bring lot of fortunes for you. You will not make any decision in a haste. A person may level a false allegation against you, but it will have little impact on your reputation. Money and wealth will keep coming. You will get things of leisure. And you will be having good time with your family members. You will have good understanding with your life partner. You will start meeting lot of people and life will be starting to get back on track. Take monetary decisions carefully. You will learn a lot from bitter experiences. The quarrel with your siblings will also get resolved. You will also receive good news.

**Pisces : (February 19 - March 20)** You will be dedicated to your work and will also be getting good results. People will praise your work and your contributions. Your financial position is going to be good. You will be exploring additional and new sources of income. You will hence be satisfied with your earnings. You will share good bonding with your mate. You will pay attention to your health. You will share your responsibilities with your family. Your enemies and critics will become active and will try to demean you in society. But they will not be successful. Time is very favorable for you. Your daily routine will be quite busy.

## Centre puts Meghalaya's water...

(Contd from P-3) "With initiatives like MegARISE, spring mapping, and community-based water harvesting, the state is protecting critical catchments, restoring forests, and empowering local communities to adapt to climate change, strengthening water security for generations to come," the chief minister said in a post on X on Friday.

For urban households, accountability will be measured less in hectares treated and more in hours of supply restored. Shillong's Umieva-linked systems have seen erratic discharge, and Tura's dependence on the Ganol leaves residents vulnerable during lean months. If catchment protection is working, evidence should surface soon—in stabilised discharge curves, reduced tanker reliance, and predictable supply schedules.

The Survey's recognition also raises the political stakes. Meghalaya's strategy is no longer a state experiment; it is a template others are being asked to copy. This status brings responsibility: Monitoring data, third-party audits, and ward-wise reporting on water availability will determine whether the model is genuinely replicable or merely well-presented.

There is no doubt the direction is right. Community stewardship, forest restoration, and scientific mapping are precisely the tools a hill state needs as climate variability intensifies. But the national spotlight changes the rules. Meghalaya was applauded for the plan; now it must deliver the results.

The story has moved from the threat to the promise of water resurrection. The next chapter will be written not in policy notes or survey citations, but in kitchens and courtyards across Shillong and Tura, where the only verdict that matters is whether the water flows. (With PTI inputs)

## M'laya nears full digital coverage...

(Contd from P-3) Officials say the improved network footprint is also beginning to influence employment patterns linked to digital infrastructure.

A key component of this phase is the upcoming Tura IT Park, described by the government as a major investment for western Meghalaya. Backed by the PM-DeVINE scheme, the project carries an estimated cost of Rs 127 crore, spans nearly 100,000 square feet, and is expected to accommodate more than 1,000 professionals once operational.

The state projects the Tura facility as a means to create skilled jobs locally and curb outward migration from the Garo Hills by opening opportunities in IT services, startups, and allied digital sectors.

The project builds on the experience of the Shillong Tech Park, operational since 2022, which has generated about 1,500 direct and 5,000 indirect jobs, while drawing national and international firms. On the back of this response, the government is moving ahead with Shillong IT Park Phase II, alongside the Tura project.

Taken together, the two IT parks are projected to generate around 14,000 jobs, linking expanded connectivity with employment creation. Officials say the focus is on aligning digital access, skilled manpower, and workspaces as Meghalaya moves from connectivity rollout to economic utilisation.

## Shillong doctor wins best paper...

(Contd from P-5) in the field of medical education and healthcare.

Shillong Medical College has congratulated Dr Sethi on the achievement, acknowledging his contribution to the institution's academic reputation.

## Hindu Sammilan Utsav meeting...

(Contd from P-5) planned with the objective of celebrating Hindu cultural heritage while fostering unity and harmony among different communities.

The event also seeks to provide a platform for cultural organisations to showcase, preserve and promote traditions, values and diversity.

The meeting is expected to deliberate on programme schedules and logistical arrangements for the proposed Utsav.

The invitation has been jointly signed by organisation president Sumitra Pradhan and general secretary Rajesh Kumar. The organising committee has expressed hope for wide participation and cooperation to ensure the successful conduct of the Hindu Sammilan Utsav in the city.

## No objection to...

(Contd from P-5) such a move could affect the VPP leader's standing in his current seat. "If he chooses to contest from here, I fear the people of Nongkrem may not accept him back," he said.

Dhar expressed confidence in the voters of Nartiang, noting they have elected him for four consecutive terms. He contrasted this with the Nongkrem constituency, which he claimed has a history of changing representatives after every election.

## ANTF seizes drugs...

(Contd from P-5) in the interstate transportation of drugs.

East Jaintia Hills Superintendent of Police Vikash Kumar said the operation was carried out based on specific intelligence inputs and reflects the district police's continued efforts to curb narcotics trafficking. "Based on credible intelligence, our Anti-Narcotics Task Force conducted a naka at Umkiang and successfully intercepted the tanker. The recovery indicates possible links to an organised interstate drug network, and we are pursuing the investigation to identify other members involved," Kumar stated.

## Conference discusses preservation...

(Contd from P-5) culture with many expressions, he said that differences in languages do not imply differences in people or cultures; instead, they form one Bhasha Parivar (language family).

Noting that linguistic conflicts were largely created during colonial rule through agenda-driven politics, he called for an integration of all linguistic expressions into a unified Indian language family to promote cooperation and national unity.

*To free a person from error is to give,  
and not to take away.*  
—Arthur Schopenhauer

## The Shillong Times

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### Lack-lustre budget

THE Union Budget presented in Parliament, unusually on a Sunday, is at best, lacklustre. The government has not even made any pretence at populism. Nor is there any big push on any front. Income Tax rules remain mostly untouched this time, but some reliefs in the regulations are evident. More funds have been earmarked for the defence sector, understandably in the context of Operation Sindoor and the somewhat hostile environment in the neighbourhood. Appreciably, the expenses are kept in line with the earnings. Among the highlights, spending is estimated at Rs 53 lakh crore or \$600 billion — some four lakh crore more than the previous term. The fiscal deficit has been placed at 4.3 percent of the GDP, down from the 4.4 per cent the previous fiscal. Special focus this fiscal would be on boosting seven strategic sectors — semiconductors, rare earth, electronic components, biopharma, domestic chemical production, capital goods and textiles.

The budget proposals say the “first kartavya” is to accelerate and sustain economic growth by “enhancing productivity and competitiveness, and building resilience to the volatile global dynamics.” Significantly, the gross government borrowings, up to 17 lakh crore, would largely go for assets creation, and less towards current expenses. The defence sector capital expenditure has been increased by 17 per cent, in what also signals a major push for the new military industrial complex for manufacture of defence equipment. Noteworthy is the hike in infrastructure funds to 12.22 lakh crore, against the 11.2 lakh crore last year — an increase by 8.9 per cent, which is cited as the biggest-ever annual hike in this sector. This is a guarantee that the Centre would continue with its infrastructure push with renewed vigour.

Both port and rail connectivity through enhanced infrastructure development with a fund of 10,000 crore for the next five years is supplemented with the plans to develop seven high-speed rail corridors as growth connectors, including Mumbai-Pune, Pune-Hyderabad, Hyderabad-Bengaluru, Delhi-Varanasi and Varanasi-Siliguri. Among the other notable proposals are an outlay of rupees 10,000 crore over the next five years to develop a global biopharma manufacturing hub; an increase in the outlay for electronic components manufacturing scheme to 40,000 crore; the setting up of dedicated rare earth corridors to support mineral-rich states with a view to promoting mining, processing, research and manufacturing; establishment of dedicated freight corridors connecting Dankuni in the east to Surat in the west; creation of five tourism destinations in the five Purvodaya states; a scheme for development of Buddhist Circuits in the north-eastern sector; and launch of 20 new national waterways to transport minerals, and a revision of baggage clearance rules for international travel. Sitharaman, who is credited with presenting nine successive Union Budgets, is right in claiming that the nation’s economic trajectory in the last 11 years was marked by fiscal discipline and sustained growth. The government, she claimed, has chosen “action over ambivalence and reform over rhetoric.” The financial and political stability that the three terms of the Modi government provided the nation was principally due to this fiscal discipline. That’s evident in this budget too, though there’s nothing very inspiring about the present set of proposals.

# Issues in the Indo-Bangla Border

By H.H. Mohrmen

There were two news items that appeared in the public domain recently which had a connection with Bangladesh. The first was the arrest of a Bangladeshi national near Lad Denthing, close to Jowai, and the second was the visit of the Shillong MP to the border. In this article, I will try to address these two issues by taking into account the condition of the border and understanding the issues in their proper perspective. Let us begin by looking at how the border was created.

### The Radcliffe Line

The demarcation of the Indo-East Pakistan border (now the India-Bangladesh border) in 1947 was part of the broader Partition of India and was defined by the Radcliffe Line. Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a British lawyer with no prior experience in India, was appointed Chairman of the Boundary Commissions for both Punjab and Bengal in June 1947.

The border was drawn primarily on the basis of contiguous majority areas of Muslims and non-Muslims, while attempting to take into account “other factors” such as natural boundaries, communication, watercourses, and irrigation systems.

Radcliffe was given just five weeks to divide 175,000 square miles of territory with a population of 88 million people. The commission included representatives from the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, but due to deadlocks, the final decision was left to Radcliffe himself. The Radcliffe Line was finalized a few days before independence but was officially revealed on August 17, 1947, two days after India and Pakistan gained independence.

### Crossing the Indo-Bangladesh Border Illegally

I had never thought I would share this story because it is not something rare; I know people cross the international border every now and then. People cross the border primarily for cultural reasons. Those who live on both sides of the border are the same people; they visit each other during times of joy and bereavement, birthdays, naming ceremonies, and church services.

The reason I crossed the border on that particular occasion was also because someone from the church I served had died. Families were divided, with one part ending up in one country and another in a different country; simply because

those in power decided to draw a border through the land they lived on. I had to conduct the funeral, and the situation could not wait for me to arrange a visa. Besides, people cross the border with the tacit knowledge of the border forces on both sides of the divide.

I do not think it is wise for me to describe in detail how and from where I crossed, but in the latter part of the 1990s, I did cross and walk through the border without a visa, permit, or any document to identify who I was, for that matter.

I did not share this story until the serial bomb blasts in Assam on October 30, 2008. It was suspected that criminals from across the border were responsible for the blasts. That was when I realised that I must share my story to demonstrate how porous the border is and how easy it is to cross the international boundary.

After the story was published in one English daily, the BSF Director General, who obtained my number from the newspaper staff, called me and asked whether I had really crossed the border. I answered with a question of my own: “Do you want me to show you where I crossed from?” He later excused himself and told me what I already knew, that it is not easy to guard the border because of the terrain.

### The Impact of Partition

There are two lessons I learned from this story. First, the Partition did not have much impact on the movement of people across the border. The two border forces understand the people’s need to move across. In fact, rather than Partition, it was the Bangladesh Liberation War that had a far greater impact on the people. There was a massive movement of people from then East Pakistan to India. Partition happened far away; there was no large-scale movement of people in this region, and it did not have much impact on those living along this side of the border.

### About the People along the Border

The second and more important point is that the people living on both sides of the border are the same, the Khyntiam, War, and Pnar — though the dominant population is War. Even the common language of communication is not Khasi but the War-

Jaintia dialect.

How did our people come to live in what is now Bangladesh? This article focuses only on the area between the plains of Sylhet and the Jaintia Hills, which once formed part of the Jaintia Kingdom. The kingdom’s dominion extended southward to Sylhet, which was then called the Jayantia parganas. This area was once part of the great Jaintia Kingdom, and the people have lived there since time immemorial. They simply happened to be on the wrong side of the divide when the country was partitioned before independence.

There are no fewer than twenty thousand Khyntiam, Pnar, and War people in Bangladesh, and they are the autochthons of the area, having lived there for generations. Except for fewer than a hundred families in Jayantiapur, the majority live in the hill areas of present-day Bangladesh, and their main occupations are betel nut (areca nut) and pan leaf cultivation.

### Oranges and Trade along the Border

When I was a child, in the late seventies and early eighties, my grandmother had an orange orchard in Nongtalang. We would spend the early part of winter helping the family harvest the oranges when they ripened. I remember eating only the choicest oranges, but today the people of Nongtalang have to buy oranges from Jowai.

What is the connection of this story to the border? All the oranges produced from my grandmother’s plantation were exported to Bangladesh via Tamabil in Dawki. My point is that the border has never been a problem for those living along the Indo-Bangladesh border. As is always the case along borders, there is both legal and not-so-legal trade — but we will leave that discussion for another time.

### Land Held in Adverse Possession

Let me share my third story, which has a connection with the recent visit of Dr Ricky Syngkon to the border. Once there was cross-border firing between the BSF and the then BDR at a place called Rhongkum near Muktapur. The firing lasted for several days, and we were asked to cover the flag meeting when the two sides decided to resolve the

dispute. The conflict was over a rice plantation right on the border, and upon investigation, we learned that it was actually a family dispute.

The paddy field was owned by members of the Dhar clan, some of whom lived in India and others in Bangladesh. The Indian Dhar claimed they had planted the rice that season, but when harvest time came, the Dhar living in Bangladesh harvested it. The Indian Dhar complained to the BSF, and the firing started, eventually leading to the flag meeting between the two border forces.

The flag meeting also taught me a few lessons about land ownership along the border, which is peculiar to this region. While waiting for the meeting, I spoke with the BDR commander, who spoke with a British accent, and we discussed the dispute. It was clear that the disputed land lay partly in no man’s land and partly across the border pillar. The commander rightly pointed out that the land fell under Bangladeshi territory, a point with which I agreed.

However, before visiting the site, I had done my homework. I had spoken to Promiwell Lyngdoh, then Principal Secretary of the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council, who explained the concept of “land held in adverse possession.” This means that although the land falls under Bangladeshi territory, it is held by people living in India. These owners had been farming the land since before independence, so how could it be their fault that, with a single stroke of a pen, their land ended up in another country?

This is perhaps one of the most unpleasant outcomes of Partition that directly affected the local people in this region. It continued until recently, when locals had to part with their land simply because someone in authority decided to draw the border across it.

For those who question why people along the border vehemently oppose border fencing for so many years, one major reason is land held in adverse possession. Those who own such land across the border would inevitably lose it once fencing was erected. But the most important reason for opposing the fence is that the border itself is unnatural — it divides people who belong to the same ethnic group, speak the same language, share the same culture, and, most importantly, share kinship ties.

# Air pollution also looming over the Northeast

By Shahruk Ahmed Mazumdar

When it comes to air pollution, most Indians think of North India, especially Delhi. It is a fact, though. However, recent reports indicate that states in northeastern India are also facing air pollution issues. But compared to Delhi or North India, the air pollution condition in the northeastern states is particularly less worrisome. Nonetheless, the government must pay attention to the issue and take appropriate steps to keep it from getting worse, as it presently exists in Delhi. Each person is impacted by air pollution, but children and the elderly are the most vulnerable. Many people, including parents and environmental activists, staged a protest at the India Gate in November 2025 due to Delhi’s deteriorating air quality.

The northeastern states, such as Assam and Tripura, are emerging as major pollution hotspots, questioning long-held beliefs that the Northeast has better air quality than other regions. According to the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA), states such as Assam and Tripura recorded high PM2.5 levels throughout the year, including the monsoon season, when much of India typically receives cleaner air. According to the results, eleven districts in Assam are among the fifty most polluted in India, comparable to Delhi’s share and putting the state among the worst-affected regions. In terms of the environment, black carbon from Guwahati disrupts local climatic patterns by absorbing sunlight and trapping heat, which leads to glacier melting in the Himalayas.

Due to pollution from nearby industries, distilleries, and iron and steel facilities, thirteen of the top twenty most polluted cities in the world in 2024 were located in India, including industrial sites like Bymihat and Delhi, the most polluted capital. In order to lower dangerous PM2.5 levels in Bymihat, a 2022 Meghalaya Pollution Control Board report suggested stopping construction and restricting truck movement. However, after six ferro-alloy and related factories were ordered to close on January 29, 2025, for violating environmental regulations, the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) discovered that the ambient air quality in Bymihat had barely changed.

One major pollutant that increases the risk of lung cancer, heart disease, and asthma is PM2.5, which is roughly thirty times smaller than a human hair and enters the bloodstream and lungs deeply. According to WHO estimates, an estimated 4.2 million premature deaths worldwide are attributed to ambient air pollution each year.

The burning of fossil fuels and biomass fuels in vehicles, power plants, factories, and industrial facilities, as well as the burning of coal, wood, and charcoal in domestic stoves and agricultural waste, are the main sources of air pollution. Particularly in urban areas, these activities discharge harmful particles into the atmosphere. Sandstorms, wildfires, and wind-blown dust exacerbate the situation by dispersing pollutants across large areas.

However, a diverse approach is required to effectively address air pollution and prevent a public health emergency. The long-term approaches to lower vehicular emissions encompass accelerating the transition to clean energy, strengthening public transport systems, and improving last-mile connectivity with zero-emission options and demand management tools like congestion taxes. These steps can help reduce the sources of pollution during spikes. Another significant source of pollution, open burning, can be decreased with proper waste collection and segregation. More robust emissions regulations, continuous oversight, and stringent enforcement are required for industrial sources in and around cities, particularly for highly polluting industries.

India’s indigenous population is another susceptible group. The most significant mining and industrial operations continue to take place in the vicinity of ostensibly legally protected tribal areas, such as those in northeast India. The deforestation and rising pollution levels brought about by this excessive industrial activity for revenue-generating purposes are aggravating the declining living conditions of the local indigenous communities. The region’s air pollution and health risks are exacerbated by the dust from the mining trucks. For indigenous populations, the effects of air pollution extend beyond their health.

The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), along with the State Pollution Control Board (SPCB) and pollution control committees, is principally responsible for monitoring India’s air quality through the National Air Quality Monitoring Programme (NAMP).

The Air Quality Index (AQI) tool was introduced in India in 2015 to provide the public with simply comprehensible information on air quality levels. Raising awareness and promoting a team effort to tackle this environmental issue requires educating the public about the causes and effects of air pollution as well as pushing for legislative changes and sustainable solutions. The issue of air pollution is too big for any one government or industry to handle on its own. All parties must work together to use creative solutions.

In order to effectively address air pollution in accordance with the National Ambient Air Quality Standards, the Indian government introduced the National Clean Air Program (NCAP) in 2019. Its target, however, is far more lenient than the WHO’s recommended limit. It is crucial to note that the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends against exceeding 15 µg/m³ and 5 µg/m³, respectively, for yearly mean concentrations of PM10 and PM2.5.

The University of Chicago’s Energy Policy Institute’s Air Quality Life Index (AQLI) indicates that approximately 46% of Indians reside in areas where air pollution considerably shortens life expectancy.

Beijing was dubbed the “smog capital” of the world twenty years ago. Nonetheless, it has made a significant effort to enhance its air quality while simultaneously attaining remarkable economic growth through strict regulations and efficient air pollution management policies. By 2017, highly polluted areas had significantly improved by 35% due to Beijing’s efforts, which also included the creation of an early warning and emergency response system, improved regulation of pollution activities, the relocation of factories from populated areas, and incentives for farmers to discourage agricultural burning.

In India, air pollution has become a serious public health issue. Notwithstanding the challenges, progress can be achieved with a proper blend of political will, effective implementation, and a robust compliance mechanism.

(The writer can be contacted at : shahruktechnical@gmail.com)

### Letters to the Editor

### In Defence of Youth

Editor,  
The Shillong Times of Jan 30, 2026 carried a letter titled “The Youth of Today”. The writer made several observations about the behaviour of children today. These observations are no doubt visible to all of us.

Adolescents and teenagers are still transitioning into adults. Formation into adults happens only by the mid or late twenties, and for some even later. Their brains are still developing and so they have not achieved executive function, the ability to make well-considered decisions. They are still cognitively, socially, psychologically, morally and culturally immature.

They indulge in risky behaviours. They don’t think much about consequences, and are easily influenced by peers. The writer herself/himself agreed that when we were teenagers, we did the same things, “but we never indulged in such behaviour openly”. So is it ok if we hide these behaviours? This is nothing but plain hypocrisy, and skirts the issue completely.

The world of today is a much more stressful place. Today’s youth see little hope of careers, financial stability and happiness. So they are prone to anxiety and depression, and suicides are highest in this age group. In her editorial of Jan 30, 2026, Patricia Mukhim listed education, livelihoods and drugs as threats to our youth in Meghalaya today. There is little reassurance of a better future for our youth.

The same letter offers only punitive solutions such as “strict disciplinary measures on students”, and “routine inspections”. Harsh measures are often self-defeating and youth must be allowed their space and agency. I, for one, am glad that they are carrying condoms. It is well-known that decreeing abstinence from sex doesn’t work. Self-protection is better.

So are we to turn a blind eye to these public behaviours? Not at all. Parents, schools, and community organizations should engage with teenagers, treating them as adults, discuss and reason with them. At the same time, we should offer assurance and space for them to grow, giving them a strong support system.

Yours etc.,  
Glenn Kharkongor,  
Via email

### Colonial legacy shapes the present

Editor,  
This refers to Jairaj’s letter titled “Need for Justice with Balance: UGC Regulation 2026” published in

your esteemed daily on 31st January 2026. The author has rightly emphasized the importance of maintaining a fair balance in the framing of laws that directly affect the lives of citizens.

The controversy surrounding the enactment of the 2026 UGC regulations, the widespread protests against them and subsequent stay granted by the apex court reveal how deeply the legacy of colonial governance continues to shape our present. The episode bears an unsettling resemblance to the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 which rested on the notion that certain tribal communities were inherently criminal. Under the said Act, communal identity replaced individual evidence and once a tribe was “notified,” every member was presumed guilty without the safeguard of a fair trial. Birth alone determined one’s standing before the law. Few may realize that this draconian legislation remained in force in independent India until 1952, a full seven years after freedom was attained. Thus, Hon’ble supreme court’s remark while stalling the UGC regulations — whether we are moving backwards needs to be taken seriously by one and all. This episode exposes the fact that although the reins of governance have changed over time the colonial mindset of governance still continues.

Yours etc.,  
NK Kehar,  
Shillong-3

### Problems of border fencing

Editor,

Apropos of the news “VPP MP assesses Bangla border fencing concerns” (ST January 31, 2026), the “Joint India-Bangladesh Guidelines for Border Authorities” adopted in 1975 is a bilateral guideline between India and Bangladesh that mandates construction along the Indo-Bangla boundary at a distance of 150 yards (approximately 137 metres) from the zero line (international boundary), on the Indian side. The guideline is a part of mutual agreement to avoid encroachment and maintain visibility and access for both sides. Why 150 yards from Zero point? India and Bangladesh agreed that fencing should be built within Indian territory but not closer than 150 yards from the border to avoid dispute and ensure visibility for border forces. The fencing is meant to curb illegal migration, smuggling and infiltration while respecting the sovereignty of both nations. The Border Security Force (BSF) follows this guideline strictly, though exceptions may be made in difficult terrain or densely populated areas. In areas like Meghalaya and West Bengal, villagers often live and farm within 150 yards of the border. Fencing at this distance can cut off access to farmland, markets and water resources leading to protests. As of 2025, there are at least 95 critical patches along the Indo-Bangla border that remain unfenced due to terrain, disputes or local resistance. Occasionally, Bangladesh raises concerns about fencing alignment, especially if it affects shared

resources or settlements.

In the case of Meghalaya, in Jaintia Hills if the National Buildings Construction Corporation Limited (NBCC) is planning to construct a fence nearly one kilometre away from Zero point that would amount to 7.30 times the norm. Therefore, the eight villages which are affected are right in stating that farmers could lose vast stretches of arable land if the fencing proceeds along the proposed alignment. The Hon’ble Member of Parliament 1 Shillong Constituency rightly said “If this happens, local residents could lose their homes, farmland and plantations, and such a proposal should not be accepted.” He also rightly rebutted the cost aspect claimed by the NBCC for construction of a bridge by saying “If a bridge is necessary for public welfare, it must be built — it is the right of the people.” There is no dearth of funds from the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India whose budget for Border Management is about Rs 5000 crore the purpose of which is Indo-Bangladesh fencing, flood lighting and border roads. It is for the National Buildings Construction Corporation Limited (NBCC) a Navaratnam Central Public Sector Enterprise (CPSE) under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India to access the fund and build a bridge where it is needed the most at a time when the situation in Bangladesh is precarious.

Yours etc;  
VK Lyngdoh  
Via email

### Real development

Editor,  
Development extends far beyond mere economic indicators, encompassing the holistic well-being and empowerment of citizens. A truly developed state prioritizes quality education, fostering critical thinking, creativity, and values that enable individuals to secure meaningful employment and contribute to society. Equally crucial is access to good health, allowing a resilient and productive population to participate actively in social and economic life.

Furthermore, real development encompasses social justice, equal opportunities, and inclusive growth. Ensuring citizens feel safe, respected, and fairly treated and cultivates trust in institutions. Essential amenities such as clean water, sanitation, affordable healthcare, and social security are vital components of this paradigm. Ultimately, development is about cultivating capable, healthy, educated, and empowered citizens, rather than merely constructing infrastructure or boosting economic figures, which is the mode adopted by most state governments and the central government too.

Yours etc,  
Krishnendu Deb,  
Via email

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"Positive anything is better than negative nothing."

— Elbert Hubbard

## The Shillong Times

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### Society at Disquieting Crossroads

THE news of brothers raping their own sisters in a village in Ri Bhoi district and that the matter had to be reported to the police by village authorities has shaken the soul of Meghalaya. Or has it? Beyond the one-day reportage of the incidents that had ostensibly happened repeatedly and bruised the souls of the girls who were raped, life will go on and the matter will be forgotten. That the society is broken beyond measure and that a large number of youth are a troubled lot goes without saying. Too often they have no outlet for their angst except to share with equally disturbed peers. The mobile phone has today become the pacifier for their sexual escapades. Pornography is available on every handset and the impact that this has on young minds has perhaps not yet been studied. The mobile phone replaced the classroom during the Covid years and the online classes served their purpose. But it also became a dopamine inducing substance that the young seem to be constantly in need of. Some are now addicted to pornography.

Psychologists aver that exposure to pornography at a young age leads to poor mental health, sexism and objectification, sexual violence, and other negative outcomes. Among other risks, when children view pornography that portrays abusive and misogynistic acts, they may come to view such behaviour as normal and acceptable. This is perhaps the reason for crimes against women and increasingly against younger girls who have not even reached the age of puberty and are not in a position to defend themselves. The Ri-Bhoi district police have arrested the three brothers, one of whom is a juvenile in this case. What is worrying here is that the mother of the perpetrators and the victims knew about the incest but could not bring herself to report the matter to the police. There is no mention about the father. Possibly the woman is a widow or a single parent which is common in Meghalaya.

Rape is the result of deeply rooted social, cultural, legal, and psychological factors. Based on societal studies and crime data in India and closer home in Meghalaya, this violence is not the result of sexual desire, but it is an act of power, control, and domination. Clearly those three brothers must suffer from mental health problems. Key factors contributing to rape are many and include misogyny and deeply embedded patriarchal structures which treat women as inferior beings and commodities to be used and controlled. Also, the aversion to discuss sex and its consequences openly in the classroom or within families and treating it as a hush-hush affair only worsens the situation. In our societies today men are socialized to view violence and dominance as signs of masculinity, while misogynistic cultural traditions normalize the devaluation of women. The fact that matriliney in this state is often romanticised while the harsh realities are kept under wraps because of the need to exhibit only the good side to the world has only created more problems for women because they are the ultimate victims. How this case will take its course and whether society will come forward to discuss the present issue and the larger ramifications it entails remains to be seen. Efforts to sweep this incest under the carpet will only worsen the situation.

### Letters to the Editor

#### News that shock and shame

Editor,  
The news that flash on our screen and reports in the newspapers disturb the very core of our souls. A few days ago a 6 year old girl was raped by 3 minors aged 13, 14 and 15 in Delhi and now we learn of a case of incest here in our very own state. Three brothers sexually assaulting their three minor sisters is enough to make one's hair stand on end. Added to this is the fact that the mother was well aware of it but kept it a secret. I'm sure as a mother she does not and never will condone this act of her children but must be filled with shame and fear. It also conveys the message that the world is gradually moving towards a point of inability and unwillingness to set right what is wrong. Words like conscience, morality, sin appear to be mere words with little to no meaning at all.

Rape, violation of girls and women, illicit relations especially within the family are violations of norms both moral and social and even religious. What is worrying is the increasing number of such crimes that seem to have exceeded all limits. Can we afford to allow the world we live in to be one that demeans us humans? Can we remain silent and untouched and merely thank God that it is not us or not anyone of our own? When a crime is committed, the law

must take its course. Justice must be provided to the victim and punishment be awarded to the perpetrator without disparity on the basis of ages when the crime is of the same intensity and nature that an adult may commit. The law is not merely to correct but to act as a deterrent. Hence justice must be swift and stringent.

As families we all need to do some soul searching and work hard to live morally well and not waver from the path of righteousness and morality. The home must be a place that comforts and shapes the mind and soul of its inmates. We cannot keep mum and merely feel the fear and disgust and forget about it. If it is happening in this very world we live in we have to work within our individual hearths and homes with our kith and kin to steer clear from what can cause harm and shame. Everything begins at home. Once the home is safe and secure, the rest of our lives and this whole wide world will be a place filled with love and righteousness. We owe it to ourselves just as we owe it to each other.

Yours etc.,  
Jennifer Dkhar,  
Via email

#### When the Chief Minister is the harasser

Editor,  
Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's recent declarations urging citizens

# When the State Walked Away On 20 Years of MGNREGA: A Moral Reckoning

By Sanjay Das

Twenty years ago, India passed a law that did something rare and necessary: it spoke honestly about poverty. It did not describe it as bad luck, laziness, or something people should quietly endure. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) recognised poverty for what it often is—the result of not having work, land, or security in an unequal economy.

MGNREGA was not just another welfare programme. It was a promise by the state that survival would not be left to charity or silence—that if people were willing to work, the state would not turn away.

As someone who has watched this law shape everyday life across rural India—and in Meghalaya in particular—I mark its twentieth anniversary with pride in what it achieved, grief at what has been taken away, and deep concern about what its dismantling tells us about how power is exercised today. A law that once guaranteed the right to work has now been repealed by the BJP-led Union Government and replaced with a framework that removes that legal guarantee.

This is not a routine policy change. It is not a technical adjustment. It is not reform in any meaningful sense. It is a moral decision. At its heart, this is not a debate about budgets or efficiency. It is about right and wrong.

#### What MGNREGA Meant for Rural India

MGNREGA did not live mainly in files or speeches. It lived in homes.

It lived in village kitchens where a few weeks' wages meant food on the stove. It lived in households where families delayed migration just long enough for a child to finish a school term. It lived in the lives of women who could earn money close to home, whose work was finally recognised by law rather than treated as informal help.

The Act did not promise prosperity. It promised something simpler and more urgent: breathing space. And for the poor, breathing space often means survival. It is the difference between coping and collapse, between staying rooted and being forced to leave, between dignity and despair.

Under MGNREGA, a worker did not beg for employment. She applied for it. She demanded it. She went to the panchayat with her job card and the law on her side. That mattered. It told her that her survival was not a favour—it was a right. It told her, plainly: your life

matters enough for the state to respond.

#### The Moral Vision Behind the Law

MGNREGA began with an uncomfortable but necessary truth: poverty is rarely a personal failure. It is shaped by landlessness, caste and gender exclusion, climate shocks, and an economy that creates wealth for some while leaving others with nothing but uncertain labour. The law refused to pretend otherwise. From this honesty came its moral logic. If the market cannot provide work, the state must step in. If lack of work leads to hunger, the state cannot look away. And if dignity depends on having a livelihood, then livelihood cannot depend on charity—it must be protected as a right.

For nearly two decades, MGNREGA served as a law that held responsibility in place. It was imperfect and often delayed, but its purpose was clear. It told the poorest citizen something the Indian legal system had rarely said before: you are allowed to ask, and the state is required to answer.

#### The State's Obligation and Its Withdrawal

When a worker applies for work and is told to come back next month, what she experiences is not a policy debate—it is absence. Democracy is not something she feels in speeches; she feels it in whether the state responds when she needs to survive.

The legitimacy of democratic power rests not only on elections, but on whether the state takes responsibility for those with the least power to protect themselves. A society shows its character not when the economy is growing, but when people are struggling.

MGNREGA recognised this. It treated unemployment as a long-term reality, not a temporary inconvenience. It treated hunger as a public responsibility, not a private shame. By guaranteeing work on demand, it turned concern into duty.

The repeal of MGNREGA and its replacement with a discretionary, capped, centrally controlled framework breaks that duty. What has been withdrawn is not just a programme, but a promise.

There was a time when the state said: if there is no work, we will provide it. A time when it said: hunger is not your fault. A time when it said: dignity does not require permission.

Today, the message is different. Workers are asked to wait. They are told funds have run out. They are expected to adjust, migrate, and

endure. And often, the state says nothing at all.

This is not a technical delay. It is the state stepping away from its responsibility. It is not governance under pressure. It is abandonment.

#### Betrayal Requires Clear Language

When harm is caused through law, words matter. What has happened here is not a small change. A right has not been improved—it has been removed. A guarantee has not been refined—it has been dismantled. Protection has not been updated—it has been replaced with permission, dependent on approvals and ceilings. Calling this "reform" empties the word of meaning. Reform strengthens rights. It does not quietly take them away.

Words like "efficiency" and "streamlining" sound harmless, but they hide real consequences. Families do not experience "streamlining"—they experience delayed wages, unpaid work, and empty kitchens.

When language hides harm, it becomes part of the harm. Naming loss clearly is not exaggeration. It is responsibility.

#### Silence, Comfort, and Distance

Power does not operate alone. It lasts because many people, often without meaning to, allow it to. Not everyone supported rolling back MGNREGA. But many accepted it by staying quiet, by assuming it was unavoidable, or by telling themselves that budgets leave no choice.

How many people accepted the idea that this had to happen without asking who decided it should? How many believed that lack of funds excuses hunger? How many assumed the poor would "manage somehow," without thinking about what that managing actually means—skipped meals, children leaving school, families forced to leave home?

Cruelty does not always arrive loudly. It often comes calmly, dressed up as discipline and responsibility. It survives because those who are not directly affected feel distant from the pain and mistake that distance for innocence.

Silence becomes habit. Comfort becomes excuse. Distance becomes denial. This is how harm spreads—not only through decisions made at the top, but through quiet acceptance everywhere else.

#### Constitutional Memory, Ethical Forgetting

India's Constitution was meant to be lived, not ad-

mired from afar. The courts recognised long ago that the right to life includes the right to livelihood, because life without dignity is not life at all.

MGNREGA brought that promise into everyday life. It made clear that rights do not stop at the edge of poverty. Dismantling this guarantee is not continuity—it is forgetting. It is a step away from the hard-won understanding that democracy must protect those who have the least. This is not reform. It is regression.

#### Power Without Exposure

Those who dismantled this law will never stand in ration lines. They will never choose between migration and hunger. They will never wait months for wages already earned. Their children will not be pulled out of school because work disappeared.

This distance matters. When decisions are made by people who will never live with their consequences, suffering becomes abstract. What looks efficient in offices feels brutal in villages. What is called discipline in policy becomes dispossession in daily life.

#### The Loss Beneath the Numbers

The greatest loss here is not income. It is dignity. MGNREGA told people: you are allowed to ask. Its removal tells them: qualify, comply, wait, and hope.

When the law stops answering, people stop asking. They stop going to the panchayat. They stop expecting a response. That silence—the moment when citizens no longer believe the state will listen—is the most damaging loss of all.

#### A Message for the Future

This moment will not disappear quietly. It will be judged—by those suffering now, by those who inherit deeper inequality, and by history itself. Somewhere tonight, a worker will stop waiting for a guarantee that once existed—not because her need has ended, but because hope has. This rollback was not inevitable. Alternatives existed. Choices were made. A society is not measured by how efficiently it manages growth, but by whom it chooses to protect when growth falters.

When the state walked away from those with nothing but their labour, where did you stand—and where will you be remembered as standing?

(The writer is General Secretary, Meghalaya Pradesh Congress Committee)

# Beyond Narrow Identities: A Call for Social Cohesion

By Divesh Ranjan

From honour killings to political manipulation, rigid identities divide society. Embracing inclusiveness and broader identities can ensure peace, unity, and progress.

An individual carries several identities, such as their name, birthplace, family, state, citizenship, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, caste, education, and job. These identities help us feel connected. They motivate us to feel proud, celebrate achievements, and aspire for progress. However, these identities can spark clashes, group conflicts, societal unrest, ethnic violence, and even religious wars. The bloodshed caused by identity-based conflicts has existed for centuries, perhaps since the inception of Homo sapiens.

As humanity became wiser, our identity expanded as well. We began to feel a sense of shared belonging, an attraction to inclusivity, and societies based on these principles began to evolve ahead in the world. Through various religious and spiritual traditions, it appears that various paths ultimately point towards the same truth: "We are One." Though we possess different identities, biologically we are built on the same pattern. With a broader mindset, unity in diversity, and inclusiveness, we can transform into a prosperous society. However, history also shows that society can be divided, and people can be ruled by encouraging differences in identity. From ancient rulers to the British to contemporary politics, divisive strategies of "divide and rule" have often been based on this approach.

The role of diversity in shaping personality is exemplified by astronaut Sunita Williams. When asked what shaped her personality and helped her achieve success, she replied that she was raised in a multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-linguistic, and diverse environment from childhood. This shaped her broad outlook. Scientists think broadly and shape the future because they recognize a universal identity beyond individual differences. As Indians, we must feel proud of our vast diversity, especially in Meghalaya, which has multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-linguistic, food traditions, flora, and fauna. This richness makes the state uniquely cosmopolitan and attractive to the world. Unfortunately, many still cling so tightly to identity that they fail to see how it becomes a root cause of many crimes, especially honour killings, and how it is often exploited by power players to suppress and divide people.

We keep our identities so rigid in our minds that anyone cunning can easily manipulate and divide us further into sub-identities. This is evident in the voting pattern found all over India, where it often determined by caste, sub-caste, and religious affiliations. Even in a state like Meghalaya, where the religious majority is dominant, voting patterns can tilt towards sub-religious lines. We become so vulnerable through these identities that politics can easily divide society by raising issues around them.

In one instance from another state, I witnessed a riot-like tension erupt from what was originally just a minor clash between two individuals, one riding a motorbike and another driving an auto. The auto hit the bike, leading to a verbal dispute and then a fight. This was simply a conflict between two individuals. It could have remained an individual matter. But because they belonged to different religions, the incident quickly escalated. Gossip carried their religious identities into the dispute, and soon tension

spread across communities. Such situations could have been handled by limiting the matter to the individuals involved, with police and courts doing their duty. Yet, someone always seems to fan the flames, allowing an individual dispute to disturb societal peace.

There are often vested interests that introduce identity into such conflicts to gain political advantage. Fear leads to polarization, and polarization benefits only those who profit from division. Meanwhile, common people struggle simply to live peacefully with their families. Until we move beyond these misleading concepts of identity, our society cannot evolve like a truly developed one. This is where the role of social reformers and statesmen becomes critical, yet such leadership is rare.

The recent Garo Hills incident could also have been limited to an individual dispute. Instead, it risks being turned into ethnic tension. This is, in essence, a problem for the police, the judiciary, and the government. People must keep patience and trust the administration to do its duty. The West Garo Hills Superintendent of Police was quick to act, taking suo-moto cognizance, referring the poster to forensic analysis, and pointing out the possibility of a planned effort to create a disturbance in the maintenance of law and order. A public notice was also put out, calling for peace and harmony. If any groups or individuals begin taking the law into their own hands out of fear, it only worsens the situation. Pressure groups have public trust, and therefore, it is also their responsibility to support peace and social cohesion, not spread fear.

The recent ISIS poster may have been placed with vested interests; possibly to disturb social tranquility before the GHADC election. It could also be an attempt to create panic or blame the government for any future unrest. At first sight, the poster appears to be a rough draft using an ISIS logo. This leads to one very important question: why would ISIS, with its international agenda, all of a sudden take notice of a small, economically poor region? Such naming and propaganda through posters has become a global phenomenon and is not entirely new. The police and the administration are on the job, but the larger question is: are we so vulnerable that a poster in one place is enough to disturb our peace and harmony? Is our social fabric so easily disturbed? Even if there is a threat, the people must trust the police and the administration. This should not become a cause for public panic, but for investigation and legal action. Election time is always a tense period in India. It may be propaganda, but who benefits from it? It does not help the ruling party politically. In fact, extreme polarization may weaken the government, making it responsible for any deficiency in law and order. Therefore, the situation has to be controlled, and that should happen immediately and effectively. The government must make sure that the perpetrators are caught and that justice is served. Leaders and social workers must come forward to maintain harmony. Until forensic results are out assuming a genuine ISIS threat may itself become a delusion driven by identity-based fear. Until we adopt broader identities and inclusive thinking, society will continue to suffer from such deep divisions. Individuals and communities must think beyond the illusion and delusion of identity for a prosperous, peaceful, cohesive, and progressive society.

(The Author is a Scholar, Thinker and Columnist at The Shillong Times)

the law declares that his mission is to "make people suffer" until they flee the state, he doesn't merely cross ethnic boundaries he weaponizes governance itself for demographic engineering, eroding federalism's promise of equal citizenship. These remarks have rightly triggered police complaints for inciting hatred under Sections 153A and 505 of the IPC, and demands for judicial intervention from civil society and opposition parties.

The appropriate response isn't partisan retaliation but unwavering insistence that no elected official regardless of party affiliation may convert public office into a vehicle for ethnic cleansing by bureaucratic means. India's democracy survives not through majoritarian assertion but through the stubborn protection of minority rights; when that principle fractures in Assam, it threatens the constitutional compact binding every Indian state.

Yours etc.,  
Marbiang L Rymbai,  
Via email

#### A Call for Accountability

Editor,  
I wish to begin by extending my sincere credit to the organizers of the recently concluded Revival Healing Festival 2026. To pull off a historic success of this magnitude with

only one month of preparation is nothing short of remarkable. However, I must write to express my deep indignation regarding the failure of the Ri Bhoi Police and the district administration to manage the staggering traffic congestion on the NH 30 bypass during the final two nights (January 29th and 30th).

My family and I were trapped in a chaotic bottleneck for four gruelling hours. A standard two-lane road was inexplicably allowed to morph into a lawless six-lane mess, stretching over five kilometers. Most distressing was the sight of ambulances caught in this gridlock. While we, by the grace of the Almighty, reached the venue at 6:38 PM, a long trail of vehicles remained behind us—many likely carrying ailing family members who could not reach their destination on time.

This experience left me both angry and deeply concerned. The organizers had informed the Ri Bhoi Police and district administration well in advance, seeking the necessary assistance. To see such a total breakdown in order is not a matter of incompetence, but sheer negligence.

With an expected turnout of 1.8 lakh attendees, the authorities knew exactly how this situation would unfold. They had the roadmap; they simply failed to act on it. Personnel should have been dispatched to every critical junction, from Lad Umroi to Lad Nonglakhat, Mynsain, and Lad Bhoi Rymbong. If

manpower was the issue, why was assistance not sought from the East Khasi Hills police? Proper management would have saved thousands of commuters from unnecessary distress and headaches. One can only imagine the nightmare faced by the families of patients trapped in those ambulances.

Regrettably, a culture has taken root in Meghalaya where the police seem paralyzed unless ordered by the "babus" of the higher echelon. It is time for this system to change. This debacle highlights a profound lack of concern from the state government. It appears that unless a "fancy festival" is taking in the "moolah," the administration remains indifferent. For VIP events, they will turn the world upside down to ensure their high-level officials have a smooth ride on our national highways. But for the common citizen, we are met with a "CHALTA HAI" attitude.

It is not okay. Shame on you.

On a concluding note, I once again congratulate the GATEKEEPERS and Pastor Crosslin Marbianing for making the Revival meeting a grand success. Glory to the Almighty!

Yours etc.,  
A.Laiphlang,  
Shillong-2

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*"Be yourself, everyone else is already taken."*

— Oscar Wilde

## The Shillong Times

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## Trump's new offers

IN a confusing scenario, the US has announced tariff cuts on Indian goods from 50 to 18 per cent with immediate effect. The announcement by President Trump was immediately welcomed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, but questions remain. For one, a formal agreement is yet to be announced. Related documents have not been finalized or released. Trump has a habit of blowing hot and cold. More surprisingly, he has announced that India would fully halt Russian imports and shift to supplies of the US-negotiated Venezuelan oil, and that India would drop trade barriers to zero on American goods. India, he says, would commit to purchases from the US to over \$500 billion dollars. Overall, perceptions here are that Trump, who talked to the Indian PM on phone, has muscle-flexed India into making compromises. Modi's expression of gratitude to Trump is significantly silent on a shift from Russian to Venezuelan oil. Analysts note that this is not a fully-sealed pact and could be subject to changes.

Several issues add to the present confusion. While India has reduced its oil dependence on Russia and turned significantly to the US for oil imports to fuel our production lines and transportation requirements, an abrupt halt to supplies from Russia could disrupt supply chains. The Reliance refinery, for instance, has committed itself to buy 1,50,000 barrels of crude a day from Russia from this month. Notably, India managed to beat inflationary trends of late by resorting to purchasing Russian crude at low prices, beating US sanctions on Russia subsequent to its invasion of Ukraine. This caused Trump's ire, leading to imposition of the 50 per cent tariffs on goods exported to America from here. The present announcement by the US means Trump has achieved what he had sought from India and found a huge market here for the "looted Venezuelan oil. But, India's bilateral trade with the US would see a spike. The present level is of \$200 billion, of which India's exports from the US is only of \$50 billion. What goes from here to the US are coal, technological purchases as in IT software, and agricultural products. The overall impact of such policy shifts on the Indian economy remains to be seen.

Trump is a hard nut to crack. He has his mood swings. Yet, his word is law in the US and beyond. How the present scenario shapes up will be known over a period of time. The US under Trump is increasingly getting hostile to India and the Indians settled there. His regulations during the present term are already working to the disadvantage of Indian techies. They power the US computer industry, which accounts for a quarter of the country's trade sector value, but their life is getting increasingly miserable due to governmental arm-twisting. Techies who come to India on vacation wait endlessly for a return visa; and more often than not, this is rejected, putting them in a state of uncertainty about their future. Indians in the US are getting increasingly isolated in the public sphere, under Trump, and many are entertaining thoughts of a return to their homeland for good.

# Navigating Murky Waters: World Cancer Day

By Dr. Caleb Harris M.Ch.

A prominent citizen of Shillong called me a few months ago, wanting to send one of her employees for cancer treatment. She added that she would send someone with the patient, despite my assurance that the patient would be taken care of—insisting that it would be difficult for them to navigate through the hospital. The patient did not need any assistance and eventually completed treatment. However, this reflects the perception that hospitals are not easy places for people to visit. This is ironic, as hospitals are places visited by people when they are most vulnerable.

Pynshaibha Latam, in 'Need for help desks and quality health care in hospitals', ST dated 27.3.25, listed out the challenges faced by patients at hospitals, but the solution is not very simple. There was a very successful hospital chain in South India, whose USP was easy patient navigation. The moment a patient stepped into the hospital, a staff member would greet and lead to the registration desk and help complete the process, following which the patient would be taken to the consultation room of the doctor. Another staff would accompany the patient for investigations, purchasing medicines, etc. While this system seems efficient, it requires a lot of dedicated manpower. Besides, ensuring a motivated workforce is easier said than done in a government setup. It would be a challenge to equip our public health systems with such 'navigators'.

Navigating the justice system or any government service is not unlike healthcare. Rural folk and the disadvantaged face the same challenges listed in this article. A society may not expect, only one aspect (Healthcare) to be super-efficient without addressing the overall professionalism. Would a government servant or court employee who is not courteous in his work expect kindness during his visit to the hospital?

It is heartening to note that the medical world has recognized that the differ-

ences in access to treatment may affect overall treatment outcomes. A patient whose cancer has been operated successfully but is unable to receive chemotherapy due to financial or logistic reasons will have a poorer outcome. If he is provided the necessary assistance and encouragement, he may probably be able to complete the treatment.

Implementation Research (IR) deals with understanding and closing the gap between evidence-based treatment and practice. Rather than invest in research projects which focus on discovering new treatment options, IR focuses on ensuring that proven treatment reaches those who would benefit from it most. Apart from treatment for cancer, tuberculosis, etc., strategies to promote health, such as vaccination, cancer detec-

tion and screening, mental wellness and maternal health are being studied. While the initial part of IR involves understanding the problems, there is an 'implementation package' which is designed to overcome the challenges and improve the outcomes.

Part of the implementation package would be patient navigation which could range from a simple pamphlet explaining the processes, to a video guide, to a physical navigator who would guide the patient. This, of course, depends on

the availability of resources. While such IR projects are helpful, the challenge is in the sustainability of these navigation systems once the project is over and there are no longer any project staff to assist as patient navigators. Harold Freeman is an American physician who is widely recognized as the Father of Patient Navigation. He recognized the poorer treatment outcomes of cancer patients at Harlem, compared to the rest of USA, thereby pioneering the concept of patient navigation. Individuals were trained to work consistently with patients and their families throughout their journey through the medical system. These navigators were trained to identify and overcome the barriers to appropriate and timely treatment and care.

In India, the Tata Memo-

*"Navigating the justice system or any government service is not unlike healthcare. Rural folk and the disadvantaged face the same challenges listed in this article. A society may not expect only one aspect (Healthcare) to be super-efficient without addressing the overall professionalism."*

rial Centre, Mumbai, has started KEVAT— a patient navigation program. This is a one year post graduate diploma program offered in association with Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). Apart from being trained to assist patients through their cancer treatment journey, they can counsel patients and work as a bridge between patients and the healthcare systems.

World cancer day, observed on February 4th annually, is an initiative of the Union for International

and moral values at a young age, many of the unpleasant and uncalled-for behaviours seen during adolescence would not take root later in life.

Character building must begin early. Qualities such as respect, self-control, patience, and responsibility cannot suddenly be expected from teenagers if these values were never nurtured in their formative years. When children grow up without clear boundaries and moral grounding, they become more vulnerable to peer pressure and impulsive behaviour.

It may seem far-fetched to cite Japan as an example, yet it offers an important lesson. In Japanese schools, the early years of education give priority to discipline, cleanliness, respect for others, and character formation, rather than academic competition alone. Children are taught habits first, academics later. This approach produces individuals who regulate their behaviour through inner discipline, not fear of punishment.

In contrast, many families today are facing new challenges. The rise of nuclear families and the reality of both parents being working professionals mean that children often receive less time and attention at home. The traditional presence of grandparents—who once played a crucial role in storytelling, moral teaching, and emotional bonding—is now largely absent. In many households, screens have replaced conversations, and digital content has replaced moral narratives.

This is not to blame par-

ents, but to recognise a social shift that demands conscious correction. When family time shrinks, schools and community institutions must shoulder greater responsibility in shaping behaviour and values. Education cannot be limited to textbooks and examinations alone; it must include emotional maturity, ethical understanding, and social responsibility.

Discipline, however, should not be confused with harsh punishment. Consistent guidance, open dialogue, and setting personal examples are far more effective than fear-based control. Children learn more from what adults do than from what they say. If timely intervention is ignored, minor acts of indiscipline can gradually harden into serious social problems. What begins as casual smoking or defiance may eventually lead to substance abuse or other harmful paths. Prevention, therefore, is not only wiser—it is humane.

Dr Laitphlang's letter should serve as a wake-up call. Raising responsible children is not the duty of parents or schools alone; it is a shared responsibility of society. If we fail to act early, we risk paying a far heavier price in the future. The issue before us demands reflection, responsibility, and immediate action—before concern turns into regret.

Yours etc,  
Jairaj,  
Via email

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

## Women Empowerment through Cash Transfers: Fact or Myth?

By Antriksh Kar Singh

The cash schemes targeting several demographic groups, particularly women, on the eve of the state assembly election, apparently became 'a sure-shot solution' for political actors across the spectrum.

The recent development happened in poll-bound Assam, where the state government decided to release Rs 8,000 on February 20 as an "advance Bohag Bihu gift" to 37 lakh women beneficiaries listed under Orunodoi. This includes Rs 5,000 'Orunodoi' from January to April, along with a special Rs 3,000 as Bihu gift.

The announcement kick-started controversy as the opposition criticised the move to freeze 'Orunodoi' payout for January, claiming it may cause a detrimental effect on disabled, elderly, and those on the lowest social strata. However, political commentators termed it as 'copying playbooks' from Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Bihar, where such schemes were credited for the landslide win of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

Such a scheme is, however, not limited to only NDA ruled states. Because political actors across the spectrum announced/rolled out schemes in 17 states, including Assam, in the past five years, apparently considering this 'populist welfareism' as a 'shot in the arm'.

Of those, 13 states have a functional monthly scheme providing Rs 1000 to Rs 2500 to adult women in the state. Odisha provides Rs 10,000 annually in two instalments, while Bihar provides a one-time lump sum of Rs 10,000. These schemes have declared objectives to support livelihood and empower women.

However, it remains to be seen how a meagre monetary support of Rs 1000 to Rs 2500 a month can support livelihood or empower women, when the country has high inflation and a depreciating value of the rupee that fell to a record low of Rs 90 against 1 USD.

Further, an analysis of literacy rate (women) data from the Union Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation (MOSPI) for the states with such a scheme showed a mixed response.

Karnataka (2.50%) and West Bengal (2.80%) recorded an increase in literacy rate among women by June 2024 in comparison to the year of launch of the scheme. Tamil Nadu (0.40%), Telangana (3.80%) and Assam (1.60%) recorded a decline.

The cash scheme in Tamil Nadu and Telangana was launched in March and December 2023, respectively. The literacy rate for these two states in India's south is still better than that of most Indian states.

But the decline in women's literacy in Assam is worrying. Orunodoi is one of the oldest, continuing monthly payout schemes started in October 2020. The highlighting feature is that women's participation in the labour force has increased in Assam from 2017-18, as recorded in economic survey 2023-24. The Economic Survey, however, attributes this increase to several initiatives like the Mudra scheme.

So, what exact changes did these schemes cause? The answer to this question is given by the May 2024 report by SBI research, which credited the rollout of women-focused welfare programmes for 1.8 crore more women voting in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections than in 2019.

It further noted that 19 states, including Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Odisha, where women-centric schemes were implemented, recorded an average rise of 7.8 lakh female voters.

However, the states, including those that didn't implement those schemes, saw an average increase of just 2.5 lakh women voters. But, the most significant finding was recorded in the SBI research study (December 2023) report, finding a relation between the electoral success and the monthly cash given in a scheme in Madhya Pradesh.

Madhya Pradesh's Ladli Behna Yojana led to a 1% rise in marginalised women receiving benefits, which translated to a 0.36% increase in electoral success rate for the incumbent party-Bharatiya Janata Party in this case, the report stated.

On average, 1 in 8 constituencies (30-35 seats across 8 dis-

tricts) showed a pro-incumbent outcome in Madhya Pradesh, added the report. Similarly, Bihar, where Mukhya Mantri Mahila Rojgar Yojana provided a one-time sum of Rs 10,000 to 1.25 crore women on the eve of the assembly election, recorded 8.8% higher women voter turnout than men, even surpassing the male voter count in absolute numbers.

When EC1 declared the result in November last year, NDA got over 200 in the 243 seats Bihar assembly. The 2025 Bihar electoral experience is significant as it was widely reported that Assam Chief Minister Hemant Biswa Sharma was key in suggesting a one-time cash payout to women instead of a monthly one to Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar before the election.

And, now, when Sharma led the Assam government smartly using similar tactics in the form of Rs 8000 "advance Bohag Bihu gift", the election became interesting even before the announcement of the schedule. Its impact on election results must be seen. Further, there is another important aspect to all these schemes—the monetary cost involved.

An analysis of functional schemes of 14 states (13 monthly and Odisha) showed a whopping annual cost of around Rs 17.50 lakh crore, if all claimed beneficiaries are provided with money. The amount needs to be understood in the context that this amount is around one-third of the union government's annual expenditure of Rs 50.65 lakh. However, Indian politicians are all of the same breed, as this scheme is just like 'promising the moon' to secure a win in an election, but reality remains different. A very similar thing is happening in these women-centric schemes.

APRS Legislative Research reported that 12 states across India would collectively spend Rs 1.68 trillion on unconditional cash transfer schemes for women in 2025-26, though six have estimated a revenue deficit.

Even this Rs 1.68 trillion cumulative expenditure of 12 states for the cash transfer scheme for women is higher than India's annual education budget of Rs 1.28 trillion and the Rs 0.998 trillion health budget for 2025-26.

Moreover, the Assam government allocated Rs 5000 crore for the Orunodoi Scheme in the 2025-26 budget, which is higher than the budget for rural development, welfare of SC, ST and OBC, and Housing verticals.

The Orunodoi scheme constituted 37% (over one-third) of total allocation under the Social Welfare and Nutrition head in Assam's annual budget. Similar schemes have created trouble for states like Madhya Pradesh, whose debt-to-GSDP ratio is very similar to Assam.

Assam's debt to GSDP ratio is 24.3%, and for Madhya Pradesh, it is 25.7%, where the government is troubled with financing other necessary welfare schemes related to health and education and relies on constant borrowing. A very similar scheme promised in the 2022 Punjab Assembly election became a constant embarrassment and criticism from the opposition for the Aam Aadmi Party-led state government, where the state, with an over 40% debt to GSDP ratio, couldn't begin monthly payout despite the passage of four years. Similarly, other state governments are accumulating debt, and such cash schemes are further aggravating the problem without any concrete evidence for improvement in the status of marginalised women.

Therefore, the political parties and governments shall reorient themselves to look for a concrete long-term plan for eradicating poverty, providing accessible education and health services, and working for a better, sustainable future. And, in case the political actors 'continue to stick to such electoral gimmicks, the common man needs to use their ultimate power of vote judiciously.

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## Letters to the Editor

### What Do We Really Learn from the Epstein Files?

Editor,

The revelations coming out of the Epstein scandals force people across the world to question the truth about money, power, and politics. Jeffrey Epstein's life story itself raises serious doubts. He started his career as a private school teacher in the United States, then suddenly left teaching and entered the world of finance. Within a few years, through unclear sources of income and private investments, he became a millionaire and therefore, gained close access to powerful politicians, businessmen, celebrities and academics from both the US and other countries.

In 2005, Epstein was arrested in Palm Beach, Florida, after complaints of sexual abuse of minors. In 2008, he pleaded guilty to charges of molesting underage girls. However, instead of a strict punishment, he received a highly lenient sentence that allowed him to leave jail daily on work release. In July 2019, he was again arrested on federal charges of human trafficking involving minors. Shockingly, in August 2019, Epstein was found dead in prison, leaving many unanswered questions.

It must be noted, Epstein's power came not only from his money, but from his connections. Over the years, he maintained relationships with well-known figures

such as Michael Jackson, Noam Chomsky, Bill Gates, Bill Clinton, Donald Trump, and many others. One of the darkest aspects of the case was his ownership of Little St. James Island in the US Virgin Islands, later known as "Epstein Island". Survivors have alleged that the island was used for trafficking and sexual abuse of underage girls, and that some of Epstein's guests were involved. While many people named in the case admit they visited the island for social or holiday reasons, they deny any involvement in abuse. Several others have chosen not to respond at all.

After Epstein's death, the FBI seized large collections of emails, photographs and videos related to his activities. These files remained classified for years, even as parts of them were leaked online. Names mentioned in these leaks included Stephen Hawking, Elon Musk, Hillary Clinton, Prince Andrew, Leonardo DiCaprio, Cate Blanchett, and a bunch of others. In 2024, during the US presidential elections, Donald Trump publicly spoke about releasing these classified records. This led to the passing of the Epstein Files Transparency Act in November 2025, after which the US government released parts of the documents.

Just a few days ago, on 30 January 2026, the US Department of Justice released more than three million pages, including thousands of videos and nearly two lakh photographs. The identities of victims were redacted to protect their dignity. The contents described

serious abuse and exploitation. At the same time, many shocking claims circulated online, including extreme allegations involving infants in ritualistic sacrifices. These claims have not been proven in court, but they have deeply disturbed public discussion online.

Another major shock was the mention of foreign leaders and businessmen, including some from India. The names of industrialist Anil Ambani and references to Prime Minister Narendra Modi appeared in alleged Epstein-related emails. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs however, quickly clarified that these references did not indicate any wrongdoing. But still, the files show how deeply Epstein was able to connect with people in positions of global power.

The biggest question remains - What have we really learned from all this? Can we continue to trust the system blindly that has seemed to work only for the powerful while the victims suffer for years at the periphery? Do the Epstein files show that serious crimes can continue for years simply because the accused are rich and influential? If Hitler was once labelled the most evil man to have ever lived, what about the guilty elites of today? I say this because, till now, not even one person involved in the racket has been properly arrested, except Andrew, who has been only stripped off his princely title by Buckingham Palace. The rest are still roaming free, even though law enforcement had the evidence for years before

it became public. As ordinary citizens of the world, we must ask ourselves whether simply "watching the world burn" is acceptable as long as such crimes do not affect us personally. We must remember that the Epstein case is not just about one man abroad; rather, it exposes "evil systems" that have dominated and plagued our world for decades. If we fail to treat these revelations as warnings and remain vigilant, we may regret it tomorrow when injustice comes knocking at our front door to rob us of our own dignity. Let us be awake, always.

Yours etc.,  
Sunrise Pohtam, M.Th  
Via email

### It takes a society to raise a child

Editor,

The concern expressed by Dr B. Laitphlang, published in his letter to The Shillong Times on 30 January 2026, deserves serious attention and thoughtful reflection from all sections of society. What he has highlighted is not an isolated observation, but a growing social reality that many of us quietly witness yet often hesitate to confront.

As Dr. Laitphlang rightly points out, habits are not developed in a day; they are formed gradually, from early childhood, through continuous guidance, discipline, and example. If parents, schools, and society consciously take the pain to instil good habits

and moral values at a young age, many of the unpleasant and uncalled-for behaviours seen during adolescence would not take root later in life.

Character building must begin early. Qualities such as respect, self-control, patience, and responsibility cannot suddenly be expected from teenagers if these values were never nurtured in their formative years. When children grow up without clear boundaries and moral grounding, they become more vulnerable to peer pressure and impulsive behaviour.

It may seem far-fetched to cite Japan as an example, yet it offers an important lesson. In Japanese schools, the early years of education give priority to discipline, cleanliness, respect for others, and character formation, rather than academic competition alone. Children are taught habits first, academics later. This approach produces individuals who regulate their behaviour through inner discipline, not fear of punishment.

In contrast, many families today are facing new challenges. The rise of nuclear families and the reality of both parents being working professionals mean that children often receive less time and attention at home. The traditional presence of grandparents—who once played a crucial role in storytelling, moral teaching, and emotional bonding—is now largely absent. In many households, screens have replaced conversations, and digital content has replaced moral narratives.

This is not to blame par-

## Positives of Buyer-Seller Meets

NO one can blame the MDA-2 Government for not trying hard enough to promote small and large scale businesses in Meghalaya. The state took a long time to transition from a pure agrarian economy to a food processing hub beginning with the Lakadong turmeric to ginger and black pepper powder, cinnamon bark etc., nicely packaged and branded. Visitors to the Reverse Buyer-Seller Meet at the State Convention Centre were surprised that Meghalaya has so much of rare spices to offer including the Lakadong turmeric which has the highest curcumin content in the world. Today Meghalaya produces Curcumin Latte which is a premixed mixture of turmeric and black pepper. Research states that curcumin and piperine (black pepper) combination is a powerful antioxidant. Piperine enhances curcumin's bio-availability by up to 2000%, ensuring maximum absorption. Together, they reduce joint pain, improve mobility, support metabolic health, and enhance recovery.

The key benefits of curcumin and piperine are manifold. Curcumin alone has poor absorption, but piperine (a bio-enhancer) inhibits metabolic enzymes that break down curcumin, allowing the body to utilize it effectively. The mixture targets inflammation, aiding in the relief of joint pain, stiffness, and arthritis symptoms. Both compounds neutralize free radicals and boost the body's antioxidant enzymes, protecting cells from damage. The combination helps strengthen immunity, providing a stronger defence against disease while also a digestive stimulant that helps manage metabolic syndrome and reduce bloating. Doctors say that it reduces exercise-induced muscle soreness and promotes overall health. The reason why this editorial stresses on turmeric and black pepper is because these are Meghalaya's best-selling points and with health benefits which is what the world is looking for today. But at business meets what is needed is hard selling and those who man the stalls must also be trained to explain these benefits to the visitors which probably was a point that was missed. Growing rare species of roots and tubers is one thing; branding it is another but at business meets, knowing the tactics of hard-selling is key. Visitors who are connoisseurs of wine were not impressed and found the Meghalaya wines far too sweet. Wine making is an art perfected over a long time. Wines need time to ferment and their taste is not enhanced by simply adding sugar. It's time for the state to refine the art of wine-making from fruits like soh-long by sending wine makers to reputed breweries for training under master trainers. At one time the Indian Institute of Hotel Management had brought some wine makers and tasters but perhaps that was not followed up.

There is a cruel competition in the marketplace and Meghalaya has to be the best in its chosen fields to make its products world renowned. That Eri silk and bamboo products are gaining eyeballs and are marketed with finesse shows that the state has the capability to become a world destination for such products. Even the humble broomstick if value-added would fetch a better price for farmers especially when there is a glut in the market. With government support and an aggressive push to assist entrepreneurs and food producing units, Meghalaya can soon become a globally renowned business destination.

### Letters to the Editor

## Plight of In-Service Teachers

Editor,

This refers to the news item published on 4 February, 2026 regarding the uncertainty faced by thousands of in-service teachers in Meghalaya and other states following the September 1 order of the making the Teacher Eligibility Test (TET) compulsory for all teachers.

No teacher is opposed to improving educational standards. What is deeply troubling is the fear that a lifetime of honest service may suddenly be rendered inadequate, not due to any failure of duty, but because of a requirement that did not exist at the time of appointment.

Teachers appointed before the enforcement of the entered service after fulfilling all the prescribed qualifications of that period. Their appointments were duly approved by the competent authorities, their services confirmed, and their lives gradually built around that assurance—supporting families, educating children, and planning for a dignified retirement. Applying a new condition retrospectively is, for them, like changing the rules after the game has long been played.

For many, teaching has never been just a job. It has meant years spent in remote villages, overcrowded class-

rooms, and modest conditions, driven more by commitment than compensation. To now suggest that such experience carries little value unless validated by a single test is not only demoralising but profoundly unfair.

The anxiety goes beyond employment; it is about dignity and security. Sudden disqualification near the end of a career threatens livelihood and self-respect alike. Teachers are not interchangeable parts; they are mentors and anchors of stability in schools where children—especially from vulnerable communities—depend on continuity and trust.

The wider consequences are equally alarming. In Meghalaya alone, over 32,000 teachers may be affected. Their removal would severely disrupt schools, particularly in rural and tribal areas, weaken teacher-student ratios, and ultimately harm students' right to education. Reform that unsettles functioning schools and disturbs children cannot be considered progress.

It is worth recalling that the has long recognised the value of professional experience and in-service training, and that the speaks of empowering teachers through continuous development—not discarding them mid-journey.

It is therefore sincerely hoped that teachers appointed prior to the RTE/TET regime are granted exemption. However, should the Hon'ble Court ultimately decide otherwise, compassion

Finally, after a long wait, the Government of Meghalaya has announced that it will release the Reservation Policy Report in the month of February. The report has been highly anticipated by many in the state, including pressure groups, political parties, and ordinary citizens who would like to see an end to this controversy. The delay had been creating a great deal of resentment and doubt among many people. Among the many complaints against the delay, a joke that made the rounds concerned the weight of the report—apparently over 200 kg, with around 4,000-5000 pages. I believe this massive volume is largely on account of the annexures, which themselves would run into hundreds of pages, if not more.

The committee set up to review the demand for a revision of the policy had arranged for submissions in both Shillong and Tura, spanning multiple days at both venues. Submissions were made by groups as well as individuals, and from what I heard, the same people even changed names to submit twice. Clearly, it is a very contentious issue. The sheer number of submissions has meant that every suggestion had to be acknowledged and included in the report. Failing to do so could have led to complaints of partiality and of ignoring suggestions that were not to the liking of the committee. I therefore suspect that the exceedingly high number of pages is largely due to the annexures. But we will see once the report is released.

The huge number of pages might seem daunting, and it might appear to some as a ploy to deter and confuse people. My suggestion to such people is to simply read the executive summary, which will briefly highlight the main points. That should be sufficient to reveal the report's recommendations. So, do not get intimidated by the length and weight (!) of the report. What, then, can we expect from it? Since I, along with my friends, also submitted suggestions and appeared before the committee, I can hazard a few guesses.

The first thing that was said to us when we stood before the committee was the futility of our supposed suggestion that reservation should be based on population. We were told in clear terms that the Constitution does not allow such an ar-

must guide implementation. At the very least, teachers should be offered an entirely voluntary retirement option, with all the benefits they would normally receive on superannuation—including full pension, gratuity, leave encashment, and other admissible dues—so that they may exit with dignity rather than distress.

A society that forgets its teachers forgets its own foundations. This moment calls for balance, sensitivity, and humane judgment, so that those who devoted their lives to shaping young minds are not left anxious and unheard in the twilight of their service.

The views expressed here are totally personal and intended in the larger public interest only.

Yours etc.,  
Jairaj,  
Via email

## Together in the age of artificial intelligence

Editor,  
When I was a child, I was taught that not everything on the internet is true. Today, in the age of artificial intelligence (AI), this lesson is more important than ever. Videos, audios and images can now be created by AI to look and sound very real. Because of this, it is becoming harder to know what is real and what is fake.

Many younger people and adults who are familiar

with technology can recognize AI-generated content. However, elders who are not familiar with digital technology, but still use platforms like YouTube, WhatsApp, etc. are more likely to be misled. This can be dangerous. They may fall victim to scams such as deepfake phone calls, fake videos and audios or edited images shared online. They may also feel stressed after believing false news, share misinformation without knowing it, or follow unsafe medical or financial advice. I have noticed this myself with some elders. They often say things like, "Wow, I saw this news," or "I saw this video where such and such happened in this place." When I check, I see that the content is AI-generated. Even then, they may insist that it is real and I have to explain what AI is and how it can create such realistic videos or images. This shows how easily AI content can be trusted if someone is not familiar with it.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that AI itself is not the enemy. Like any technology, AI is a blessing when used responsibly. The real challenge is not AI, but the lack of awareness about how it works and how it can be misused. People who are comfortable with technology, including family members and friends, can help by gently guiding elders to be more careful with online content. A few simple steps can help:

1. Check the source: Trusted websites and verified accounts are usually safer.  
2. Compare information: Look for the same news on other reliable websites.  
3. Look closely: Strange shadows, blurry text, or unnatural faces in images may be signs of AI.  
4. Listen carefully: AI voices may sound too smooth, robotic, or have odd pauses.  
5. Pause before acting: Do not rush to share information or give money or personal details.  
6. Use fact-checking websites: Sites like Snopes or FactCheck.org can help confirm the truth.  
7. Ask someone you trust: A tech-savvy friend or family member can help check the content.  
8. Trust your instincts: If something sounds shocking or unbelievable, check it again before believing or sharing it.

We must continue to teach one another how to stay safe online. As technology evolves, the risks become more complex and harder to detect. This is not about blaming technology, but about responsibility, awareness and inter-generational support in a rapidly evolving digital world.

### By Bhogtaram Mawroh

based on backwardness, which is not purely a function of economic criteria. The "creamy layer" concept was therefore rejected for defining reservation for these groups. Instead, a new category—EWS—was created based purely on economic criteria. Meghalaya does not yet have this category. However, under the Constitution, the state can reserve up to 10% of seats for economically weaker sections from the general population. If this were added to the existing scheme, it would result in a total reservation of 95% of government jobs in the state: 40% each for Khasi and Garo, 5% for other ST/SC groups, and 10% for EWS (general population). It remains to be seen whether, after the release of the report, the non-indigenous population approaches the courts if EWS is not included. Now that the cat is out of the bag, anything can happen.

The reason the "creamy layer" concept was not applied to SC, ST, and OBC communities is that their marginalisation is not simply the result of economic deprivation, but of identity-based discrimination. Angel Chakma was killed in Utarakhand not because he was a poor daily-wage labourer, but because he looked different from the locals. Upper castes will not automatically begin treating Dalits with dignity if they improve their socio-economic status. In fact, multiple reports suggest that attacks on Dalits often intensify when there is a perception that they are economically advancing. To make this example more personal, a Khasi boy or girl whose parents may have served as IAS officers holding important portfolios in the Union Government will still face discrimination in the same way as someone from a working-class Khasi family. Discrimination against SC, ST, and OBC communities is a product of history and cultural chauvinism, particularly in a caste-based society, with elements of racism as well. Therefore, a purely economic criterion such as the "creamy layer" cannot be applied to these groups. Given that there are already judicial precedents on this issue, any attempt to do so will almost certainly face legal scrutiny and challenges. This is where those

advocating a change in the original scheme of the reservation policy will face their biggest hurdle.

Any substantive change in the reservation policy in Meghalaya will also have implications for how reservation is framed across the country. If the Government of Meghalaya were to rework the ratio based on population—approximately 30% for Garos and 50% for Khasis—it would embolden other states to attempt the same. There have been several such attempts in the past, the most recent being by the Government of Bihar, whose decision to design reservation based on population was struck down by the High Court. Introducing population proportion as a criterion for reservation would require a constitutional amendment, similar to the 103rd Amendment that introduced the EWS category. This is why Rahul Gandhi had announced that if they won the 2024 general election, they would amend the Constitution to make reservation population-based. Any BJP-led government is unlikely to do so. Since the Congress-led INDIA alliance fell short of a majority, there has been no change to the original design of the reservation policy.

For these reasons, I would be very surprised if the expert committee's report recommends changing the present policy of equal representation for Khasi and Garo communities in favour of greater representation for the Khasi. This is the moment of reckoning. What will those who seek change do if the report does not support their demands? Will they approach the judiciary to redress what they consider, in their opinion, to be a violation of constitutional provisions? Or will they admit that they were, deliberately or otherwise, misleading the people? These are questions to which the answers will soon be revealed. The public can then decide how to respond to the revelations. Personally, I am eagerly waiting for the report to be tabled during the State Budget Session—and I am sure many others are as well. The truth may be painful for some, but in the long run it will bring clarity and peace to the state.

(The views expressed in the article are those of the author and do not reflect in any way his affiliation to any organisation or institution)

for NES" published in your esteemed daily on January 31, 2026. I wish to offer a brief clarification regarding the timeline mentioned therein. In the text, I referred to "tomorrow's confirmation" from the CEO of Prasar Bharati. While the literal date I had in mind during the drafting process was January 28, I would like the readers and the authorities to view "tomorrow" in a more symbolic light. In the context of our long-standing struggle to restore The North Eastern Service (NES) Of Akashvani on shortwave radio, "tomorrow" represents the imminent future of regional broadcasting, a future where our voices are no longer silenced by the "funeral of shortwave" but are instead amplified through the restoration of the 4970kHz and 7315kHz shortwave radio frequencies.

The breakthrough we seek is not confined to a single day on the calendar, but rather a permanent shift towards equality for Northeast India. I remain hopeful that this "metaphorical tomorrow" arrives soon, ensuring that the systematic dismantling of our regional radio identity is finally reversed.

Yours etc.,  
Hamemanbha Lyngdoh  
Lawai,  
Via email

## A Clarification

Editor,  
With reference to my letter titled "Breakthrough

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

# Far away from the road to development

By Indira Hirway

An important observation about the presentation of the budget by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman is that the speech was just too long and unilluminating, making it come across as a rather tired effort. The speech, despite its length, did not dive into the broad strategy or the overall approach underlying the myriad schemes and the numbers. In that sense, we heard many items but not much clarity on critical directional issues that is particularly required at this time of international turmoil and its cascading effects on the domestic economy. Instead, the FM spent too much time on the minutiae of the expenditure on different schemes. As a result, we missed hearing from the executive about the big picture of the Budget.

The main expenditure is on capital goods. The budget proposes to spend Rs.17.15 lakh crores used on creating capital assets. This is a positive. Capex builds for the future and is an investment that is meant to deliver long term physical assets that offer a multiplier effect and can attract private investment as it stimulates demand in the economy. As regards the budget expenditure, the highest share in total expenditure is on interest payment or debt servicing (26.20%), followed by defence (11.19%), transport (11.11%) and pension (5.54%). We remain low on expenditure on education (2.60%), health (1.96%) and social welfare (1.17%).

The emphasis on viksit

one can state that overall, the expenditure on the centrally sponsored schemes has remained almost stagnant. This gives the picture of schemes that cannot and will not deliver as intended or advertised.

The expenditure on scientific departments is a mere 1.04% of the budget expenditure. How will India achieve viksit Bharat Goals with not enough investment in evidence-based high quality scientific impetus and efforts alongside to build a scientific temper and the right attitude of the people? Considering the fact that India is lagging far behind other emerging countries in research and development, this low number is a big negative. Anecdotal evidence shows that scientific temper has taken a hit with what is sometimes called "cow-dung science" and reports that money has been spent on research that may not meet the strict demands of modern science. A proper allocation with a cautionary note on where this money would go would have helped correct this slide.

Apart from this there are several urgent problems which are not even covered in the budget. To start with, these are related to MSMEs, rising inequalities of wealth and income in India, and climate change. MSMEs are expected to play a critical role in the implementation of EU-India FTA. There are several challenges with regard to the implementation of the EU-India FTA. These are particularly re-

*"This is a shockingly low number, unbelievable because it is well acknowledged that with a population that is not healthy and is poorly educated, the nation can never achieve the goals of Viksit Bharat. Our experience in the last decade shows that unless both, education and health sectors are put under the government's management, these cannot reach the bottom 40% of the population. Yet, matters have moved in the reverse direction in recent years and the budget has been unable or is unwilling to take a bold stance on this."*

Bharat is to be welcomed. Who would not want India to be developed fully but there remain huge questions in terms of the direction of this development and what the nature of development ought to be in an India where inequality remains high, health services are poor and education poses many challenges that have been highlighted time and again. Consider that the total percentage on education (Centre and State expenditure on education combined) is merely 3.3% of the GDP, and on health it stands at just 1.5%. This is a shockingly low number, unbelievable because it is well acknowledged that with a population that is not healthy and is poorly educated, the nation can never achieve the goals of Viksit Bharat. Our experience in the last decade shows that unless both, education and health sectors are put under the government's management, these cannot reach the bottom 40% of the population. Yet, matters have moved in the reverse direction in recent years and the budget has been unable or is unwilling to take a bold stance on this. Note that the push toward privatisation of health, most visibly seen in the rise of private equity investments in hospitals, is a trend that in effect works to raise treatment costs and reduce health access, not widen it. Next, the expenditure on all centrally sponsored schemes in this current year is much less than the expenditure budgeted last year. That is, these schemes are not taken seriously by the government. And the increase in the budget on these schemes is only marginal. Considering the price rise,

lated to non-tariff barriers: the FTA requires that the production of goods should be of standard quality. Also, production of goods should be without the use of child labour, strict environmental norms should be followed, and so on. Our MSMEs today do not mostly follow these norms. However, nothing has been included to help in these fields by the budget.

There is a lot of discussion about wealth and income inequalities these days. It seems that the goals of viksit Bharat cannot be achieved with these wide inequalities. Climate change, according to the government, is limited to solar energy. However, it also includes widespread pollution, flooding experienced by almost all regions and deforestation including the worsening conditions of the Himalayas – there is no attempt to address these emergencies in the budget.

Unemployment, particularly of the youth, is rising continuously in India. The budget does not even mention this burning problem. To sum up, the budget has either excluded our serious problems or given a kind of lip service to them. The country can never achieve sustainable development with such a budget. The path is not right and to that extent the dreams of development will remain just dreams.

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## NDA on the defensive

A resolute Opposition demonstrated its anger and might in equal measure on Wednesday, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi being their main target. For the first time in recent parliament history, the BJP-led Government and the treasury benches were majorly on the defensive, signifying a resurgence of the opposition might. The Government was on the defensive since Monday, after opposition leader Rahul Gandhi quoted from the "unreleased memoir" of former Army chief Manoj Mukund Naravane's book, Four Stars of Destiny. It cited allegedly the unbecoming conduct of the PM and his defence aides in the face of the Chinese offensive in Galwan Valley, Ladakh, in June 2020. This is no small matter. But Rahul Gandhi was denied permission by Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla to raise the matter in the House. To attempt to silence the Leader of the Opposition in such a sensitive matter is unacceptable. The argument from Defence Minister Rajnath Singh that no discussion be allowed on an "unpublished" book showed how desperate he has become, as the needle of suspicion was principally on him, the Prime Minister and national security adviser Ajit Doval.

The book, it appears, made some explosive comments — that the then army chief desperately waited for a response for hours after he alerted Defence Minister Singh and others over the menacing advancement of Chinese PLA towards Galwan Valley. Finally, he says, when the response came from Singh, it meant little; that he was advised to take his own decision. The biggest Chinese offensive on India in a span of decades, in which several Indian soldiers were killed, met with an allegedly irresponsible response from the highest level. Naturally, in a democracy, the executive has to take a stand, issue orders, which the military is bound to obey and implement. The military on its own cannot, and should not, act. This is abdication of responsibility. The question arises as to where was the leadership? This is a pity. On the other hand, if the book sought to spread falsehood — which is unimaginable from an individual of such a high stature — facts should have been laid before the Parliament. Rahul Gandhi was within his rights to raise the matter in Parliament, and the Government should not have cited rules to avoid an exposure. It should have given a reply in a responsible manner. Notably, the Pahalgam militant attack on a CRPF convoy in 2019 also raised similar eyebrows. The Jammu and Kashmir governor blamed the Centre for its failure to heed his advice to guard against such a targeting of CRPF convoys and transport them by air.

Narendra Modi as Prime Minister is a creation of the RSS. He has acquitted himself fairly well in several scenarios in the last 11 years. Modi provided both political and economic stability to the nation. The Opposition too acted responsibly in recent years. It respected the people's will and avoided being in confrontation mode both inside and outside Parliament. These, thus, were unusual times in a nation that is often described as a noisy democracy. But the Government should not take the Opposition for granted. It must own up its mistakes. National interests should not be compromised.

### Letters to the Editor

## When will the Polo Market see the light of day?

Editor,  
I was genuinely excited when I first heard the news about the Rs 100-crore Polo Commercial Market—Meghalaya's first modern mall—coming up in the state. However, I couldn't help but wonder why such a massive project was constructed in an already crowded and congested area. After its inauguration by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on July 10, 2025, I assumed that the mall would soon be open to the public and that we would finally get to see what it had to offer. Unfortunately, even after so many months, the mall is still not functional. It is quite shocking and disappointing to see such an inordinate delay. One is left questioning why it is taking so long. Had this been in Assam, a second mall might have been built by now. Is the structure so "modern" that it requires more time than reasonably expected? More importantly, why has the government remained so quiet about the reasons behind its continued non-functioning?

There is also a growing concern that if this delay continues, the space may eventually turn into a space for cobwebs and dark dirty

corners. As the project approaches its first anniversary this coming July, one can only hope that it becomes operational before then and serves the purpose for which it was intended.

Yours etc.,  
Benjamin Roland,  
Via email

## Parents Need to Relearn Parenting

Editor,  
Deeply shocked to learn, as reported in many daily papers, about the tragic death of three young sisters who jumped from the ninth floor of their apartment in Ghazalabad in the early hours of February 4, 2026—a tragedy so disturbing that it sends a chill through the moral bones of our society and calls for a very, very serious reflection. This is not merely another news report; it is a wake-up call that demands honest introspection from parents, teachers, schools, and society at large.

The girls—Nishika (also reported as Vishika), aged 16; Prachi, 14; and Pakhi, just 12—lost their lives around 2:15 a.m. Reports indicate that they left behind a handwritten diary expressing deep emotional distress and intense attachment to an online world, particularly after being denied access to a mobile phone. While investigations are ongoing

Disclaimer: Look, before you crack your knuckles to write me a lengthy, eloquent letter on how you once helped an old lady cross the street, let's be clear: I'm not talking about every single man. I know plenty of men who are absolute gems. Truly. But facts are facts, and the crime statistics are horrifying. They tell us that the person committing violent crimes against women and children is almost always a "Dude". So, if you happen to be one of the "Good Ones", please refrain from demanding a trophy for clearing the absolute lowest bar of human decency. Lower your hand please, we're trying to count the victims.

In this part of the world, we love to tell ourselves a comforting bedtime story. It goes something like this: "Once upon a time, in a beautiful land of mist and rain, there lived women who were worshipped, and everyone lived happily ever after." It is a lovely story, isn't it? Right up there with, "I'll start the diet on Monday," or "I'm just five minutes away". But if you actually look at the local news, you realise that women here suffer the same fate as women everywhere else.... we just have better weather and scenery to look at while we look the other way.

Don't believe me? Let's read the papers together. You don't have to look far back, in fact just a few days ago, on January 31st, 2026, three people were held in Ri Bhoi in an alleged case of incest. In the land where women are supposedly "worshipped", the danger isn't always a stranger in a dark road; sometimes it's the brothers you share a dinner table with." The Horror! The Horror!

Remember the town of Mairang, the place where hundreds of people had to rally in July 2025. They weren't out there for a football match, they were rallying to condemn the murder of a young woman whose throat was slit in broad daylight by a "scorned" boyfriend. It's a bit of a tragedy when you need a megaphone and a mob just to convince society that killing women is, strictly speaking, bad manners.

If that doesn't curdle your tea, consider the crime that shook us all, the death of a four-year-old girl and the rape and murder of a 13-year-old last year. Two girls. Gone. In a single month.

I bring all this up because, despite the bodies piling up

and no single cause should be hastily blamed, overlooking the warning signs would be both irresponsible and inhuman.

We cannot view this tragedy in isolation. According to the World Health Organization, suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among people aged 15–29 globally, and more than 700,000 lives are lost to suicide every year worldwide (WHO, 2023). These are not distant statistics; they represent young lives whose emotional suffering went unnoticed until it was too late.

Equally alarming are findings from leading medical research. Studies published in The Lancet Psychiatry and the Journal of Adolescent Health have consistently reported a strong association between problematic digital use, compulsive gaming, social withdrawal, depression, and suicidal ideation among adolescents (The Lancet Psychiatry, 2022; Journal of Adolescent Health, 2021). These studies clearly indicate that while digital platforms do not directly cause suicide, they can dangerously intensify distress when emotional needs remain unmet and support systems fail.

Such tragedies do not occur suddenly. They develop quietly—when children withdraw into themselves, when screens replace conversation, when loneliness hides behind closed doors, and when adults misread silence as normal behavior.

like firewood, the "solution" offered by society is not "stop killing people", but rather, "fix your wardrobe!" It is why I was so struck by that recent educational video, "Wat Riam Sexy Ioh Nga Thombor" (ST: 24th Jan 2026, "Don't dress sexily, or I will assault you", Ibalashisha Syiem). I watched it, read the comments, and for the first time in my life, my mouth actually stopped working. For those who know me, it is a biological impossibility, like a dog meowing or a man asking for directions.

To begin, I will say that I appreciate a video with a clear title, it saves time. It is like a movie called "The Boat Sinks"...you know exactly

*"Remember the town of Mairang, the place where hundreds of people had to rally in July 2025. They weren't out there for a football match, they were rallying to condemn the murder of a young woman whose throat was slit in broad daylight by a 'scorned' boyfriend. It's a bit of a tragedy when you need a megaphone and a mob just to convince society that killing women is, strictly speaking, bad manners. If that doesn't curdle your tea, consider the crime that shook us all, the death of a four-year-old girl and the rape and murder of a 13-year-old last year."*

what you're getting. The video frames assault as a kind of structural support beam for society....a way to ensure women don't get ideas above their station, like "walking", "talking" or "having skin". It uses this bizarre biological metaphor involving snack food: women are "Candy". If the candy is wrapped in plastic, it's safe; but if it's unwrapped....revealing the scandalous existence of a kneebone....then the men (the "Ants") will attack.

The takeaway here is that men aren't human beings with free will; they're mindless insects driven by a high-fructose urge they can't control. Apparently, if a man sees a patch of skin, he suffers a complete neurological collapse and the laws of nature take over to compel him to commit a felony.

Now, if this is true, we have a massive problem. We certainly shouldn't let men be in charge or hold jobs that require them to be around exposed female epidermis. Imagine if a surgeon saw a nurse's collarbone, went into a sugar trance, and accident-

tally removed the patient's liver. God save us all!

Yet, despite this fatal medical diagnosis that paints men as unstable insects, they're somehow still the ones occupying the high chairs and signing the cheques. It's terribly confusing. The brochures tell us that in Meghalaya, women "rule the roost". We have this beautiful system called "Matriliny"...a delightful eye-catching tourism slogan suggesting women are protected and worshipped.

But if you squint, you see that we get the surname (which is worth nothing) and the children (who are very expensive), and if you're a "rich" Khatduh, you inherit the property, but you also inherit the unpaid emotional

she's just produced an egg, not summoning the end of times. Yet, this poultry based superstition is "probably" why women aren't trusted with microphones or policy. Mind you, while we aren't trusted with power, we are generously gifted the blame. Look at the hysteria over "Influx". If a woman marries an outsider, she's accused of betraying her bloodline. But if a male "Protector" imports an army of migrant workers to dig holes, poison the water table, and sell the state piece by piece, he is celebrated as a savvy businessman. So, loving the wrong person is treason, but selling your homeland for more SUVs is just "industry".

In a normal patriarchy, men smash things because they think they're Gods. In Meghalaya, men smash things because they think they're sad, "emasculated" victims. So it doesn't really matter whether you set the Male Power Dial to "Tyrant" or "Victim", the result is the same: women get hurt. It's like a blender with only one speed...."Shred". It doesn't matter if you push the button for "Power" or "Pity", you're still going to lose a finger.

So, I have a proposal. We generally require licences for things that are dangerous.... guns, cars, industrial chemicals. Since men are now admitting, via their candy metaphors, that they are volatile biological weapons who go off without warning, let's treat masculinity like a hazardous material.

Every man should pass a safety inspection before entering a building. If you can't prove your brakes work the moment a woman appears in your line of sight, you're headed straight for Secondary Screening. You'll be led to a small, brightly lit room where a woman named Janet...who has seen it all and is deeply unimpressed by your "biological urges"...will examine every "joke" you've ever shared in the group chat and every time you miraculously "didn't hear" a woman say no. You will not get to leave until Janet is satisfied that your conscience has been patched and you're no longer a walking liability to the public.

But what do I know, I'm just a woman. My opinion might trigger the end of the world. Although, looking at the crime stats, the sold-off land, and the bodies piling up, I have to ask...are you sure the hen hasn't already crowed?

Now, I'm no zoologist, but I've spent time around poultry. Usually, when a hen makes a noise, it's because

itself—perhaps in another city, another family, another silent night. But if it compels us to pause, to think deeply, and to act with compassion and responsibility, then perhaps these young lives will not have been lost entirely in vain.

This is an appeal, not an accusation. A warning, not a judgement.

It is a humble request to parents, schools, and teachers to reflect deeply on such happenings, to understand the psychology of children growing up in the digital era, and to equip themselves—through awareness, counseling, and training—to guide, support, and protect young minds before it is too late.

Let us act—before another child feels that falling into darkness is easier than asking for help.

Yours etc.,  
Jairaj,  
Via email

## Right to Menstrual Hygiene

Editor,  
By issuing a landmark ruling that recognises the right to menstrual hygiene and access to menstrual hygiene products as a fundamental right under Article 21, the Supreme Court has made an assertion that women deserve a dignified life. In addition, the Court has directed the states to

provide free biodegradable sanitary pads in schools and to set up menstrual hygiene corners with sufficient pads and innerwear. Menstruation is a universal biological process not a personal problem. Period poverty is a social issue that affects millions of women across the world. Lack of knowledge, financial constraints, inaccessibility to water and sanitary facilities and menstrual products cause serious health problems in women in India.

The inability of school girls to deal with menstruation leads to absenteeism and school drop-out. The myth of "impurity," menstruation taboos and the stigma associated with it must be rooted out from society. Only through education can the general perspective on menstruation be changed. Women must not be deprived of their right to menstrual hygiene and accessibility to hygienic products. Menstrual hygiene and reproductive health must be made an important part of the curriculum. Education must be aimed at living a comfortable life. Emphasis on menstrual dignity is a part of women's empowerment.

Yours etc.,  
Venu GS  
Kollam

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## Why Performance Is Now Measured, Not Felt

By Pranav Bhaven Savla

A few years ago, I started doing something small and slightly embarrassing. On mornings when I woke up feeling tired, I would check my phone to confirm it. On mornings when I woke up feeling fine, I would also check my phone, just to be sure.

At first, this felt harmless. Sensible, even. If technology could tell me something useful about my sleep, why not listen? But over time, I noticed a shift. The question quietly changed from "How do I feel?" to "What does the data say I should feel?" That question now shapes much more than sleep.

Over the last decade, performance has been quietly rewritten in numerical terms. Sleep is scored. Movement is counted. Work is tracked. Focus is timed. Progress is graphed. These measurements don't arrive as commands. They arrive as suggestions, summaries, gentle nudges. And because they are grounded in real science, we tend to trust them.

To understand what's happening, it helps to look closely at how these numbers are made.

Take sleep tracking, now one of the most common forms of personal performance measurement. Consumer wearables estimate sleep using motion sensors and heart-rate data. These signals are meaningful. Changes in heart rate variability and movement do correlate with different sleep stages across large populations. This is why the approach works at all.

But it's also important to understand what these devices are not doing. In sleep science, the gold standard is polysomnography, which measures brain activity using EEG, along with eye movement and muscle tone. Wearables do not measure the brain. They infer sleep indirectly.

When researchers at places such as Harvard Medical School, Stanford University, and the University of Oxford have compared popular consumer wearables with clinical sleep studies, they've found a consistent pattern. Total sleep time is often estimated reasonably well when averaged across groups. But accuracy drops sharply at the individual level, especially when distinguishing light sleep from brief awakenings. Night-to-night variability is high. The margin of error is large.

This uncertainty is well understood by sleep scientists. It rarely reaches users.

What reaches users is a single number. A score. A readiness indicator. Something that looks clean enough to trust. Around 2017, clinicians began describing a pattern that followed naturally from this design. Patients arrived at sleep clinics distressed by poor sleep data despite functioning well. They reported feeling anxious about their numbers, changing bedtime routines to chase better scores, and lying awake worrying about whether they were sleeping "correctly." The clinicians called this orthosomnia: sleep disrupted by the pursuit of ideal sleep metrics. The data didn't just describe sleep. It changed how sleep was experienced. Physical activity tracking shows how easily this shift spreads. The familiar goal of 10,000 steps per day feels scientific, almost medical. In reality, it began as a marketing choice for a Japanese pedometer in the 1960s. The number was memorable. That was its main qualification.

Only decades later did researchers test step counts at population scale. In 2019, a study published in JAMA Internal Medicine followed more than 16,000 older women for over four years. The researchers found that mortality risk decreased as daily step counts increased, but only up to about 7,500 steps per day. Beyond that point, the curve flattened. Walking more did not meaningfully reduce risk further. A 2020 study using data from the U.S. National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey found similar nonlinear patterns across broader age groups.

The science here is not complicated. Movement matters. More movement helps, but not indefinitely. Health

depends on intensity, baseline fitness, age, and context. There is no single number that applies to everyone.

The interface cannot say that. Instead, it sets a target. And once a target exists, it becomes a standard. A long day spent lifting, standing, carrying, or working with your body can feel oddly unsatisfying if the counter stays low. A day spent pacing the house can feel successful if it crosses a threshold. The number starts to define the day.

This isn't a design accident. It's how feedback systems work. Economists call it Goodhart's Law: when a measure becomes a target, it stops being a good measure. Engineers encounter it whenever a system rewards the wrong proxy. What's new is that we are now applying this logic inward, to our own bodies and minds.

Work makes the consequences clearer. Most productivity tools measure what software can see: time active, tasks completed, response speed, interaction frequency. These signals are easy to collect and easy to compare. What they struggle to capture is thinking.

Cognitive science has shown for decades that deep reasoning and learning are uneven processes. Insight often follows periods of low visible output. Struggle, delay, and mental simulation are not inefficiencies; they are mechanisms. From the perspective of a dashboard, they look like nothing.

Research from groups such as Microsoft Research and Stanford's Human-Computer Interaction lab shows that increased monitoring changes behavior. People respond faster, fragment work, and stay visibly active. The work becomes easier to track and harder to deepen. Output increases. Understanding does not necessarily follow.

If this sounds familiar, it's because most of us live inside this tension. A day filled with emails and small tasks looks productive. A day spent thinking looks empty. Over time, you learn which days the system prefers. Health metrics add another pressure: the expectation of continual improvement. Many apps establish a personal baseline and encourage you to exceed it. This sounds reasonable until you compare it with biology. In exercise physiology, gains slow. In learning science, plateaus are normal. In sleep research, variation is inevitable.

Human systems adapt, stabilize, and recover. Software systems are optimized for engagement. Engagement thrives on change. Targets rise. Streaks reset. Stability starts to feel like failure.

None of this arrives as criticism. It arrives as numbers. And numbers feel neutral. Fair. Hard to argue with.

But metrics don't see context. They don't see caregiving, illness, emotional labor, stress, or recovery. Two identical scores can represent entirely different lives. What the system cannot measure disappears from evaluation.

This is the scientific mistake at the heart of the shift: confusing signals with meanings. A heart rate is a signal. Health is an interpretation. A step count is a signal. Fitness is an interpretation. A productivity metric is a signal. Value is an interpretation.

When numbers replace judgment instead of informing it, performance narrows.

I still look at my data. Most of us do. The problem isn't measurement. It's authority. Somewhere along the way, many of us stopped asking what a number actually captures and started treating it as a verdict. Science was never meant to work that way. Measurement is supposed to sharpen judgment, not outsource it.

The real skill we need now is not better tracking, but better reading. Knowing when a metric is useful, and when it's just confident. Knowing when to take it seriously, and when to set it aside. Because a life well lived will always be messier than a dashboard. And performance, in the fullest sense, still lives partly in places that no sensor can reach.

(The writer is First Year Student, Plaksha University).

*"Do it with passion or not at all."*

— John Wooden

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**Shocking Tragedy: Illegality Persists**

IT took the deaths of 18 lives of the poorest and most destitute for the Prime Minister of the country to announce an ex-gratia payment of Rs two lakhs per life. The question is whether Rs two lakhs will see the family of the deceased through for the rest of their lives. The question to the Home Ministry is why is it not following the Meghalaya High Court directive to appoint central police personnel to check illegal coal mining activities. What interest does the BJP Government at the centre have to give the MDA Government a long rope to continue with illegal coal mining. Unfortunately, Meghalaya does not have a robust human rights organisation to take up such issues consistently and with the determination to bring the matter to its logical end.

In India lives don't matter. In Meghalaya where the coal mafia pervade every level of politics and administration, accidents occurring due to the unethical rat hole coal mining and its allied activities are pure "accidents." The coal mine owners call it "inevitable." Using dynamite to blow apart stubborn rocks to reach the coal seams, without permission and supervision is an illegal activity too but who cares about the law? The excuse that coal mining happens deep inside the jungles too is facetious. It's a lame excuse to allow coal mining to carry on. The Chief Minister had himself argued a couple of months ago that coal mining is as old as civilisation, without going into the history of commercial coal mining in Meghalaya — an activity that was undertaken on a commercial scale when the British came to these hills. Before that the coal was mined for subsistence only. It wasn't the money raking activity that it is today. The fact that the coke industry is still flourishing in East Jaintia Hills, West Khasi Hills and Garo Hills and in Byrnihat is in itself a certification that illegally mined coal continues to be fed into those units.

The cycle of illegality and corruption is known to every person in Meghalaya. Words like "High Level" and their power and might to run the system according to their might are known across the state. In East Jaintia Hills trucks are modified to extend their heights so that they can carry 150 tonnes or more weight per truck. These trucks have no registration numbers as demanded by the Transport Department. The state police look the other way or take their commission to allow the trucks to pass through. For the East Jaintia Hills District Police and the Deputy Commissioner to feign ignorance about illegal coal mining is shameful. They can just visit Sutnga to see the coal coming in day in and day out. But when the police and administration feign ignorance about an activity that carries on in broad daylight, it means both these governance agencies are in connivance with the coal mine owners or that they have failed big time and stern action needs to be taken against them. In Meghalaya accidents like the latest one happen regularly but are quickly forgotten because there is no single civil society group to pursue the matter. And why? Because most coal mine labourers who put their lives on the line are non-tribals whose lives don't matter. In Meghalaya only tribal lives matter and this has been proven time and again.

**Letters to the Editor****Epstein files and the fall of icons**

Editor,

The release of Epstein's files has opened a hornet's nest. What shocks the world the most is the involvement of celebrated figures in depraved indulgences. It is terrifying to see young children crying while being sexually abused and tortured. These revelations undoubtedly betray the trust of millions who once admired those celebrities and followed them as their role models. No other revelation has evoked such widespread disgust in this century. Followers of those celebrities now watch in disillusionment as their idols are named in connection with Epstein's murky world.

Melinda French Gates, the former wife of Bill Gates, was among the first to speak out. She lamented: "No girl should ever be put in a situation that they were put in by Epstein and various other people around him. It's beyond heartbreaking." Her words reflect personal disgust and pain. They also express a broader condemnation of the exploitation that has come to light after a long wait.

Victims, some of whom were very young and pushed into the dark hole of ex-

ploitation at the time, are now coming forward with courage to name those heartless perpetrators. Among the most startling claims are those aimed at the current president of the United States, Donald Trump. Photographs and videos circulating online are presented as clear proof. They have fueled public outrage. Many now express contempt for leaders entangled in such allegations. The evidence is abundant.

What is most disturbing to me personally is the revelations involving internationally known spiritual master Deepak Chopra, who authored a number of insightful books. A man who built his reputation on guiding and inspiring people to seek peace and happiness within, not outside, has now been linked to emails that virtually belie what he once stood for. Yes, his words to Epstein, "God is a construct, cute girls are real", are most disgusting. The castle of integrity and reverence that Chopra once commanded has now collapsed into pieces, proving that even those who preach transcendence can be enslaved by carnal desire.

Apart from the top-ranking linguist Noam Chomsky, the most celebrated scientist, Stephen Hawking, who consistently applied his mind to the mysteries of the infinite galaxies, was also invited to

**A Cartographic Injustice: The 1951 Severance of Jaintia Hills from its Ancestral Homeland**

By Dr Omarlin Kyndiah &amp; Prof PM Passah

Of all the three tribes and the three regions that now comprise the present State of Meghalaya, the Jaintias and their homeland—the Jaintia Hills have been the most neglected since the Independence of India. A large chunk of the Jaintia Hills, the already small remnant of the Jaintias' once-larger kingdom was unconstitutionally detached, transferred, and mechanically tagged with the non-contiguous and truncated Mikir Hills (now Karbi Anglong) in April 1951, very soon after the promulgation of the Constitution of Independent India on 26 January 1950.

Hence, of all the three regions of Meghalaya, the Jaintia Hills constitute an exceptional case in the history of the present boundary dispute with Assam. It may well be the first and only instance where a State violated the provisions of the Constitution of India soon after its promulgation, particularly in respect of Part X (Article 244) and Part XII (Article 275). These two Parts of the Constitution, along with the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, adequately provide for the protection of, and fiscal assistance to, Scheduled and Tribal Areas in the country. Yet, the then Government of Assam politically meddled with the tribal area set apart for the Jaintias, in violation of constitutional provisions and against the ethno-geography and geo-polity of the hill tribes of the North-Eastern region, hardly fifteen months after the Constitution came into force.

The British annexed the Jaintia Kingdom in 1835 and confined the Jaintias to their small hilly country as their primitive and ancestral home. This arrangement was duly ratified by the Constituent Assembly under the Constitution of Independent India, approved and signed on 26 November 1949 and promulgated on 26 January 1950. However, the then Government of Assam, against the will of the people, detached a large portion of the Jaintia Hills comprising two Dalloiships (Nongphyllut and Ri Bhoi), one Sirdarship (Langsoh-Mynriang), a large part of Raliang Dalloiship known as Pangam Raliang, and parts of the Dalloiships of Shilliang Myntang, Nangding, and Nartiang. Altogether, these areas constituted nearly half of the Jaintia Hills. As stated earlier, the detached area was forcibly transferred and mechanically tagged with the non-contiguous and truncated Mikir Hills for the creation of the then United Mikir and North Cachar Hills District on 13 April 1951.

Many Jaintias from the forcibly transferred area were arrested and taken to

Nowgong Jail and other jails elsewhere for their peaceful opposition to the high-handed actions of the Assam Government. Two of the arrested—Trod Thaiang and Pin Thaiang Sariang were beaten to death in Nowgong Jail, while three others went missing, and their whereabouts remain unknown even today (M.M. Thaiang, The History of the People of Labang Nongphyllut & Pangam Raliang, 2001). Those who were missing may well have been killed and their bodies disposed of at will by the Assam authorities. The martyrdom of these individuals will never be reconciled until the restoration of the pre-1951 map of the Jaintia Hills is achieved through the re-transfer of the detached areas. The souls of the martyrs are still heard crying for the re-transfer of Blocks I and II to the Jaintia Hills.

Since 1951, and for nearly seventy five years, there have been a series of peaceful movements and agitations by various Jaintia NGOs demanding the re-transfer of Blocks I and II to the Jaintia Hills, earlier officially known as the Jowai Sub-Division—one of the oldest subdivisions of the former composite State of Assam. The Jaintia people will never accept the government report vide letter No. POL.78/2010/209 dated 8 August 2011 regarding the area proposed to be transferred to Meghalaya in these two Blocks, nor the separate consideration of the villages of Khanduli and Psiar, which are integral parts of the two Blocks. For the area actually transferred, the District Census Handbook of the United Khasi and Jaintia District, 1961, remains dependable. It must be emphasised that the original demand of the Jaintias since 1951 has consistently been the re-transfer of these two Blocks as per the pre-1951 map of the Jaintia Hills.

The Jaintias accept the five principles agreed upon by the States of Assam and Meghalaya—(i) historical facts, (ii) geographical contiguity, (iii) administrative convenience, (iv) ethnicity, and (v) people's will in deciding boundary issues between the two States.

Geographically, the Jaintia Hills and the Mikir Hills are in no way contiguous. A map of the "Meghalaya and Mikir Region" taken from R.L. Singh, India: A Regional Geography (National Geographical Society of India, Varanasi, January 1971, pp. 675–695), clearly shows that the Jaintia Hills and the Mikir Hills lie apart, with the North Cachar Hills

and the Assam plains namely the Kapili and Jamuna valleys lying in between. Historically, linguistically, and culturally, the two tribes are poles apart. The Mikirs or Karbis are closer to the Assamese and belong to the Tibeto-Burman group or Bodo stock, as evidenced by historical records.

In 1957, it was agreed that Block I would be re-transferred to the Jaintia Hills pending a decision on Block II. However, the Assam Government, acting through the Karbi Anglong District Council, effectively foiled this decision, and the dispute has remained unresolved ever since (M.M. Thaiang). The only viable solution to this baffling problem is the restoration of the pre-1951 boundaries of the Jaintia Hills—the ancestral home of the Jaintias, while what remains of the so-called West Mikir Hills (West Karbi Anglong) district may be retained by Assam.

In a conciliatory spirit, it is hoped that the Government of Assam will recognise this historical mistake and make due atonement by not resisting the restoration of the pre-1951 Jaintia map, which depicts the hilly country of the Jaintias since time immemorial and which was legalised under British administration and duly ratified by the Constitution of Free India, approved on 26 November 1949 and promulgated on 26 January 1950. This position, it is believed, would find affirmation, even among fair-minded Assamese historians of the present day. To reiterate, no solution will ever mentally or emotionally satisfy the Jaintia people for all time to come other than the re-transfer of the entire area—Blocks I and II for the reunification of the pre-1951 Jaintia Hills, their ancient homeland. It is earnestly hoped that Assam will not treat this matter as one of prestige, but will act in the larger interest of peace and tranquility in the disputed area for all time to come.

A brief account of how the Commission for the creation of the then United Mikir and North Cachar Hills District was constituted is instructive. The Commission consisted of two Assamese leaders (one Minister as Chairman and one MLA), two Mikir leaders (both MLAs—one representing the Mikir Hills and another from outside the Mikir Hills), three senior officials who would naturally toe the pre-meditated line of the Assam Government (one appointed Secretary, another Additional Secretary, and the third as Member), and

only one MLA representing the Jaintias. Thus, seven members stood against one, rendering the constitution of the Commission a mere formality.

The MLA representing the Jaintias submitted a Dissent Note, which fell on deaf ears. The MLA representing the Mikirs initially refused to sign the report, as the Mikirs were denied the adjacent plains areas which they predominantly occupied and continue to occupy. He signed the report the following day, leading to much speculation as to what transpired overnight. The deprivation of the Jaintias of a substantial part of their ancestral homeland was therefore pre-conceived and pre-meditated, possibly driven by a policy of divide and rule. The Assam Government itself questioned the Commission for inflating the Mikir population figures in Blocks I and II. Although the Commission admitted that these figures were not in accordance with the Census reports, the matter was politically hushed up (M.M. Thaiang).

**Concluding Appeal to the Union Government**

The forcible detachment of nearly half of the Jaintia Hills in April 1951, barely fifteen months after the Constitution came into force, constitutes a grave and unresolved constitutional wrong. It violated Articles 244 and 275, along with the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, which exist to protect the territorial, cultural, and institutional integrity of Tribal Areas. The burden of this violation has been borne continuously by the Jaintia people.

The historical record is clear. The pre-1951 boundaries of the Jaintia Hills were legally recognised and constitutionally ratified. The mechanical attachment of non-contiguous Jaintia territory to the Mikir Hills lacked geographical contiguity, ethnic affinity, historical justification, and popular consent. On all five principles accepted by Assam and Meghalaya—history, geography, administrative convenience, ethnicity, and people's will, the Jaintia claim stands justified.

The persistence of this injustice has caused social distress, institutional erosion, and recurring conflict, undermining national interest. The Union Government, as custodian of tribal rights and inter-State equity, must intervene decisively. The only just and lasting solution is the restoration of the pre-1951 Jaintia Hills through the re-transfer of Blocks I and II, correcting a historical and constitutional wrong and restoring faith in constitutional governance.

citing unpublished material undermines the authenticity of parliamentary records. However, there are exceptions where MPs can quote from books, newspapers, or magazines if they are already published and with the Speaker's approval. Rule 349 is the operative provision: it prevents MPs from quoting unpublished books in Parliament to maintain the integrity of proceedings. The practical implication is that only published, verifiable sources can be cited, and even then, prior notice to the Speaker is often required. The Speaker has discretion to enforce this rule and disallow quotations. Further Rule 352 governs admissibility of documents. Any document or material quoted in the House must be authentic, verifiable, and accessible. The rule prevents MPs from introducing unverifiable or private material into official records. Even if a book is published, MPs often need prior notice or permission to quote.

The Speaker can stop any citation that violates House decorum or authenticity standards. The rules exist to ensure parliamentary debates are based on verifiable sources and prevent Members of Parliament from citing drafts or private notes that may later change. It also keeps proceedings free from speculative or unverifiable material. Hence the opera-

tive Rule 349 is reinforced by Rule 352 as together they ensure that only published, authentic, and verifiable sources can be quoted in Parliament. In practice, this means MPs cannot quote from books that are yet to be published, as seen in the recent case involving Rahul Gandhi and General M.M. Naravane's memoir.

In moments of high drama—like the uproar over Rahul Gandhi quoting from General Naravane's unpublished memoir—Congress often frames its interventions as moral or ethical challenges to the government. But when the chamber is dominated by noise, interruptions, and procedural objections, the "voice of reason" gets drowned out. This happens because each side speaks to its base, not to persuade the other. Rules limit what can be said, making "reason" seem like defiance. Congress may prioritize visibility over procedural compliance, aiming for headlines rather than quiet persuasion. In essence: Congress may well be trying to project reason, but in the din of parliamentary noise, reason is often overshadowed by political theatre.

Yours etc;  
VK Lyngdoh.  
Via email

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**The Cost of Political Choices on a Wounded People**

By Peter Lunthang

I am writing this not as a politician, not as an activist, but as an ordinary man whose life was shattered by the violence that unfolded in Manipur. I write as someone who lost his home, his land, his peace of mind, and his sense of security—and who is still trying to hold himself together.

*Our homes were burned.**Our lands were lost.*

We were forced to leave the places where our ancestors are buried.

We lost the ability to sleep peacefully, to eat without anxiety, to feel safe either

ened, or attended through phone calls. Grief has become quiet and lonely.

Our children study far from home through sponsorships—not out of choice, but necessity. Many parents cannot even afford to bring their children home. Seeing one's own child only through a screen is a pain that words fail to describe.

Relief and protection have reached some, but not all. Many families have received little or no meaningful assistance. Survival, for most of us, depended on mutual help—on victims

*For years now, sleep has been broken and shallow. Nights are filled with memories of fear—of people running for their lives, of the sick crying for medicines, of hunger echoing in silence while families hid wherever they could. Even today, my body carries that fear. Food does not taste the same. The chest feels heavy. This is not exaggeration; it is the long shadow of trauma. I tried, sincerely, to move forward and leave the past behind.*

by day or by night.

Along with all this, we lost something even more painful—the trust that those elected to represent our people would stand firmly with us in our darkest hour.

For years now, sleep has been broken and shallow. Nights are filled with memories of fear—of people running for their lives, of the sick crying for medicines, of hunger echoing in silence while families hid wherever they could. Even today, my body carries that fear. Food does not taste the same. The chest feels heavy. This is not exaggeration; it is the long shadow of trauma.

I tried, sincerely, to move forward and leave the past behind. But some wounds are too deep to be healed by time alone. Loss does not disappear because leaders meet, speak of peace, or shake hands. Grief does not end because official statements are issued.

Many in my village did not die only during the violence itself. Some passed away later—from stress,

supporting victims—and on compassion from individuals rather than institutions.

We watched as some responsible for violence moved freely, while victims were asked to remain patient and calm, and to "move on." But moving on requires safety, justice, and dignity—not silence.

In this painful context, decisions and alignments made by some political representatives have caused deep disappointment. When communities are hurting, leadership requires moral clarity, courage, and unwavering empathy. Anything less deepens wounds and erodes trust.

For many of us, the hope of administrative safeguards—including the idea of separate administration or a Union Territory with a legislature—represents not ambition, but survival. It is seen as a possible way to protect future generations from repeating this trauma.

That hope feels fragile. And when hope is threatened, people feel abandoned

*Families are now scattered wherever survival was possible. When someone dies, we often cannot gather. Funerals are delayed, shortened, or attended through phone calls. Grief has become quiet and lonely. Our children study far from home through sponsorships—not out of choice, but necessity. Many parents cannot even afford to bring their children home. Seeing one's own child only through a screen is a pain that words fail to describe.*

anxiety, and the weight of prolonged uncertainty. They were buried in unfamiliar lands, far from the soil of their ancestors. Even in death, displacement followed us.

Perhaps the deepest pain of all was the loss of dignity—being treated as if our suffering did not fully matter, as if our lives were lesser, as if our humanity could be ignored. Since May 2023, I have lived through a reality where killing became routine, villages were reduced to ashes, and homes and places of worship were destroyed. Entire Kuki-Zo localities vanished—not as numbers in reports, but as families and neighbors I personally knew. The humiliation and suffering of women during this period is now known to the world, and some victims never lived to see justice or even acknowledgment. These are not second-hand accounts; they are the lived reality that broke our communities.

Families are now scattered wherever survival was possible. When someone dies, we often cannot gather. Funerals are delayed, short-

once again—especially when some elected representatives from within the Kuki-Zo community choose to join a new government arrangement at a time when our wounds remain open. For many victims, this decision feels less like reconciliation and more like a retreat from accountability, taken without healing, justice, or meaningful consultation with those who suffered the most.

Everything our families built over generations was lost within days. Trust cannot be rebuilt simply by asking people to forget. History remembers moments like these—and it remembers who stood with the suffering and who did not.

I am not writing for sympathy or attention but just to be heard and our stories remembered.

But, because silence is another grave—and many have already buried too many. If I forget, I die a second death.

If memory dies, dignity dies with it.

*(The author describes himself as a survivor who lost everything, but not his memory.)*

# Why comparisons between AI and human intelligence miss the point

Claims that artificial intelligence (AI) is on the verge of surpassing human intelligence have become commonplace. According to some commentators, rapid advances in large language models signal an imminent tipping point - often framed as "super-intelligence" - that will fundamentally reshape society.

But comparing AI to individual intelligence misses something essential about what human intelligence is. Our intelligence doesn't operate primarily at the level of isolated individuals. It is social, embodied and collective. Once this is taken seriously, the claim that AI is set to surpass human intelligence becomes far less convincing.

These claims rest on a particular comparison: AI systems are measured against individual human cognitive performance. Can a machine write an essay, pass an exam, diagnose disease, or compose music as well as a person? On these narrow benchmarks, AI appears impressive.

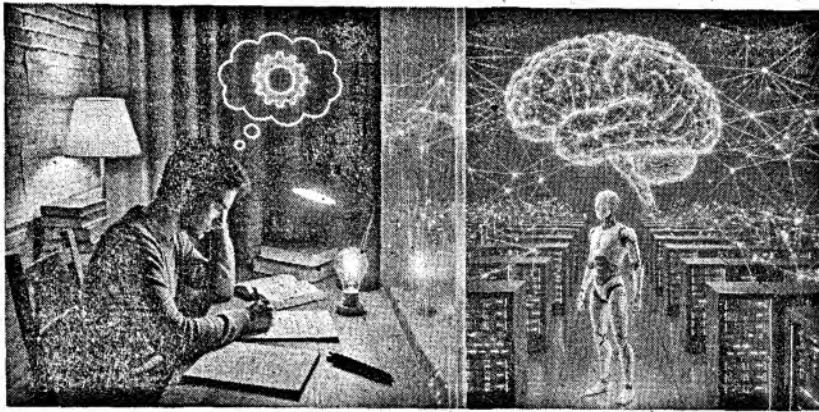
Yet this framing mirrors the limitations of traditional intelligence testing itself: cultural bias, and a reward for familiarity and practice.

The rise of AI should therefore prompt more thought about what we mean by intelligence, pushing us to move beyond narrow, cognitive metrics, and even beyond popular expansions such as emotional intelligence, toward richer, more contextual definitions.

## Intelligence is not individual brilliance

Human cognitive achievements are often attributed to exceptional individuals, but this is misleading. Research in cognitive science and anthropology shows that even our most advanced ideas emerge from collective processes: shared language, cultural transmission, cooperation and cumulative learning across generations.

No scientist, engineer or artist works alone. Scientific discovery depends on shared methods, peer review and institutions. Language itself - arguably humanity's most powerful cognitive technology - is a collective achievement, refined and modified



over thousands of years through social interaction.

Studies of "collective intelligence" consistently show that groups can outperform even their most capable members when diversity of perspectives, communication and coordination are present. This collective capacity is not an optional add-on to human intelligence; it is its foundation.

AI systems, by contrast, do not cooperate, negotiate meaning, form social bonds or engage in shared moral reasoning. They process information in isolation, responding to prompts without awareness, intention or accountability.

## Embodiment and social understanding matter

Human intelligence is also embodied. Our thinking is shaped by physical experience, emotion and social interaction. Developmental psychology shows that learning begins in infancy through touch, movement, imitation and shared attention with others. These embodied experiences ground abstract reasoning later in life.

AI lacks this grounding. Language models learn statistical patterns from text, not meaning from lived experience. They do not understand concepts in the way humans do; they approximate linguistic responses based on correlations in data.

This limitation becomes clear in social and ethical contexts. Humans navigate norms, values and emotional cues through interaction and shared cultural understandings we are socialised

into. Machines do not.

## A narrow slice of humanity

Proponents of AI progress often point to the vast amounts of data used to train modern systems. Yet this data represents a remarkably narrow slice of humanity.

Around 80% of online content is produced in just ten languages. Although more than 7,000 languages are spoken worldwide, only a few hundred are consistently represented on the internet - and far fewer in high-quality, machine-readable form. This matters because language carries culture, values and ways of thinking. Training AI on a largely homogenised data set means embedding the perspectives, assumptions and biases of a relatively small portion of the world's population.

Human intelligence, by contrast, is defined by diversity. Eight billion people, living in different environments and social systems, contribute to a shared but plural cognitive landscape.

AI does not have access to this richness, nor can it generate it independently. The data on which it is trained stems from a highly biased sample, representing only a percentage of world knowledge.

## The limits of scaling

Another issue rarely addressed in claims about "superhuman" AI is data scarcity. Large models improve by ingesting more high-quality data, but this is a finite resource. Researchers have already warned that models are approaching the limits of available

human-generated text suitable for training.

One proposed solution is to train AI on data generated by other AI systems. But this risks creating a feedback loop in which errors, biases and simplifications are amplified rather than corrected. Instead of learning from the world, models learn from distorted reflections of themselves. This is not a path to deeper understanding. It is closer to an echo chamber.

## Useful tools, not superior minds

None of this is to deny that AI systems are powerful tools. They can increase efficiency, assist research, support decision-making and expand access to information. Used carefully and with oversight, they can be socially beneficial. But usefulness is not the same as intelligence in the human sense. AI remains narrow, derivative and dependent on human input, evaluation and correction. It does not form intentions, participate in collective reasoning or contribute to the cultural processes that make human intelligence what it is.

The rapid progress of AI has generated excitement - and, in some quarters, exaggerated expectations. The danger is not that machines will out-think us tomorrow, but that inflated narratives distract from real issues: bias, governance, labour impacts and the responsible integration of these tools into society.

## A category error

Comparing AI to human intelligence as though they are competing on the same terms is ultimately a category error. Humans are not isolated information processors. We are social beings whose intelligence emerges from cooperation, diversity and shared meaning.

Until machines can participate in that collective, embodied and ethical dimension of cognition - and there is no evidence they can - the idea that AI will surpass human intelligence remains more hype than insight. (*The Conversation*)

Author: Celeste Rodriguez Louro and Jennifer Rodger, The University of Western Australia

# Teeth one of visible markers of poverty

Teeth are one of the most visible markers of poverty: structural circumstances that are individually borne.

In an essay for Aeon, US journalist Sarah Smarsh calls them "poor teeth". She writes: Often, bad teeth are blamed solely on the habits and choices of their owners, and for the poor therein lies an undue shaming [?] Poor teeth [?] beget not just shame but more poorness: people with bad teeth have a harder time getting jobs and other opportunities.

In the age of "whitened, straightened, veneered smiles", the distance between ruined, poor teeth and healthy, wealthy teeth is growing.

In the 1970s, when Medicare's predecessor was designed, dental care was left out. Since 2014, the Child Dental Benefits Schedule has enabled children up to 17 years of age to access free dental care at most private clinics if they're eligible for Medicare and part of a family that receives certain Australian Government payments.

"Dental into Medicare" was a key Greens policy in the 2025 federal election campaign. While this commitment to expanded coverage has stimulated public attention to the question of teeth and poverty in recent years, Grattan Institute researchers stated in late 2024 that "more than two million Australians avoid dental care because of the cost" and that "more than four in ten adults usually wait more than a year before seeing a dental professional".

Peter Breadon, the institute's health program director, argues that Australia's public dental system is "underfunded" and "overwhelmed".

In July 2025, the ABC reported that around a third of Australians are eligible for free or low-cost public dental services. These services receive some Commonwealth funding but are provided by state and territory governments. The ABC obtained data showing that while average wait time varies across states and territories, in some cases, people have waited years to access dental care.

Left untreated, dental emergencies can result in hospital visits. Or worse.

The United Kingdom's intensely conditional welfare system imposes a strict "work capability assessment" in a bid to limit access to disability benefits,

as does Australia's through a similar assessment tool.

A recent book memorialising the victims of the UK system includes details of a 57-year-old man found dead in his flat. His relatives discovered the lid of a shoebox in his cupboard holding two large molars and a pair of pliers.

Published in 2014, Linda Tirado's *Hand to Mouth* documents her experiences of being poor, working low-wage, unstable jobs and raising her two children with her husband, who shares her precarious position in the US labour market. In a voice that is direct, sassy, frustrated and funny, Tirado writes about the sex lives of poor people, the costly burdens of poverty (such as late payment fees), her coping mechanisms, the enjoyment she derives from smoking, and about teeth. The book's title has a clever double meaning: it's about how fragile day-by-day existence is, but also speaks to the shame surrounding poor teeth, which a hand shielding the mouth attempts to hide. Tirado's book began life as a post on an online forum she was reading to unwind after a "particularly gruelling shift" at one of her two jobs. Someone posted the question: "Why do poor people do things that seem so self-destructive?" Tirado's extended response went viral; eventually, she was approached to write a book.

The late Barbara Ehrenreich supplied a short, generous foreword. She declared herself "waiting for this book" since the publication of her 2001 classic, *Nickel and Dimed*.

Ehrenreich contrasted her "brief attempt" to subsist on low-wage service and retail jobs with Tirado's authentic dispatches from impoverished America, lending weight to the valorisation of experiential accounts of poverty over journalistic or scholarly perspectives.

Increasingly, people in poverty have challenged the presumption of academics and community sector advocates to mediate their perspectives, using digital platforms, social media accounts and publishing ventures to communicate their direct experiences, embedded knowledges and political demands directly to audiences. (*The Conversation*)

Author: Eve Vincent, Macquarie University

## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, FEBRUARY 8, 2026

### 'Birthday Forecast'

Moon trine Mercury on your solar return chart ensures an exceptional year ahead. This is going to be an amazing period for you. You will be in a positive frame of mind and will look forward to accomplishing all major goals that you have envisaged. You will have loads of patience to get the difficult task completed. Your colleagues will provide you with all support in your pursuit. Your bosses and superiors would be generally satisfied with you. You may look for new job avenues. There are possibilities of transfer/posting in your job. Your salary and pay package will increase. Financially you will be well off. There will be joy and bonding in family relations. Auspicious functions like marriage or birth of a new baby possible. You may undertake business journeys that will prove to be very beneficial. You can also invest in gold, real estate or in equity shares and bonds.

### 'This week for you'

**Aries : (March 21 - April 20)** You will be eager to finish your task. You will have gains and some losses too. You will be careful about your health. Your relationship with seniors will get better. Your financial position will also improve a lot. You will also be a lot more confident in solving problems present in your life. Your luck will be enhanced by the union of Jupiter and Moon and those in your job will get immediate benefits. Your colleagues and juniors will be in your favor. Your style of working will also be different from others. You will have good bonding with your siblings. There will be mutual understanding between life partners. You will have joy and cheer in family relations. Your fame will be everywhere. You will feel happy.

**Taurus : (April 21 - May 21)** It is ideal time to think and ponder a bit about your future. The recent time that you witnessed brought lot of turmoil in your life. You are beginning to come out of trauma and want to live your life full. New opportunities will come in your job/business. You would also like to have financial security. Your generous nature will be the topic of discussion among people. You will also be busy with religious activities, and this will give you peace of mind. You will be absorbed in your work and will be very busy. You will also get the results of your efforts. You will also use your time in looking after your children. You will have peace and money in your life. In matters of finance, you will look for your benefit.

**Gemini : (May 22 - June 21)** The beginning of the week will bring happiness. You will make work plans and adhere to it. In your job and business, you will emerge as a powerful and fearless personality. You will also get down to work seriously and sincerely. Work pressure is going to be slightly more, but you will enjoy yourself. You will take steps to increase your earnings. A visit to a close one in your house will make you happy. You will achieve your objective at work. Efforts towards expansion will be successful. There will be happiness and joy in the family. Your relationship with your partner will be harmonious. You will invest in the future and work with a plan in mind. Your name and fame will rise.

**Cancer : (June 22 - July 22)** Time is favorable. Take your work favorably and work in right earnest. Don't try to run away from challenges instead face it with determination. You will get victory everywhere. You can't afford to be complacent. You will also get a lot of practical knowledge and know truths of life. Property related disputes will also get resolved due to someone's mediation. Your business activities will continue as before. Students will be interested in studies. You will feel mentally satisfied. You will give preference to your work and give time to these activities. Peace and harmony will prevail in family ties. Loved ones will come closer to each other. Marriage plans might be made. Good news might be received from relatives or close ones.

**Leo : (July 23 - August 23)** There is going to be an increase in your work efficiency. You will be getting good results. You will be caught in a controversy, but you will avoid it well. An unknown person will help you financially. Your family problems will get resolved. You will be anxious about health of the elderly family members but there is nothing to worry about. You will be in a dilemma whether to commit in a romantic relationship. You need to take some time to arrive at a decision. You will get hold on your financial condition. You will also remain busy establishing contacts with loved ones. You will also have gains from all directions. You will pay attention to work plans and achieve success at work. You will complete your work with a mission.

**Virgo : (August 24 - September 22)** The time is good. You will pay attention to work plans and achieve success at work. You will discharge your responsibility properly. You will also become favourite in your family. It is time for getting profits. You will be

busy with romance and love affairs. Marriage could get finalized. Overall, you will be well and enjoy peaceful times. You will get mental peace. Religion and spiritual activities will hold your attention. You will be receptive towards advice. Your efforts will bring in money and wealth. You will get success in whatever you do. You will get a promotion in your job too. Property related dispute will get resolved.

**Libra : (September 23 - October 23)** You could get involved in your work. Someone may try to harm your reputation but will not get success. A third person may create a wedge in your marital relations. In your office you may face a series of difficulties but will get success in the end. You will have a discussion with your seniors or boss or some professional matters. You will come closer to your family members. You will strive hard to ensure growth in your domestic comforts. Partnerships or joint business ventures may prove fruitful. Senior family members including your parents will bless you dutifully. You will also attend some web seminars or conferences. Your timely decision may make you much profit in your work/business.

**Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22)** It is a fantastic week. You will get what you always dreamed of. You will have good relationships with your relatives, friends and business partner. Your enhanced ability will fetch some important work from your office. You will have monetary gains. Your efficiency is going to increase. You will get success in family affairs. Your honor and reputation may swell. You will do old work with a new method. You will also get involved in a romantic relationship. Love birds will have a good time. Professional activities will be normal. Your personal relations will get the top priority for you. You will be full of confidence and courage. With better family atmosphere your comfort level will be high. With the blessings of your parents and senior family members you will refrain your composure and regain your lost prestige.

**Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21)** Your financial and business position will be very strong this week. You will also sign new deals and will get lot of success with it. You will also get back your money. Your boss will be happy with your work. Your government-related work will be completed. Family members will be with you in this time of crisis. There will be sweetness in your married life. The relationship between husband and wife will get better. There will be more closeness now than ever before. Hard work and effort are the key to success. Take each step with great caution and focus your attention on your objectives. You will also develop interest in Yoga, Prayers and meditation. Your elders will keep giving blessings.

**Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20)** The week is promising a lot for you. You will come in contact with an influential politician or government official who will be very helpful. You will be making best use of your contacts. You will also take strong decisions to enhance your income. Your financial position will be very strong. You will sign a favorable business deal. You will feel quite brimful with energy. Marital life will be quite better. With your hard work and tenacity, you will regain your honour or reputation. Your activity graph will shoot up. Socially you will become quite popular. You will have amazing bonding with your partner. You will find your spouse very supportive and adjustable. The inflow of money will be thick and fast.

**Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18)** It is going to be an ideal week for establishing new contacts or starting a new dialogue. You will get immense success. Your projects will be completed. It is a very comfortable and satisfying phase. You will share good rapport with your family members. Your spouse will continue to be a source of strength and guidance. Your family members will be able to damage your interest. Friend's help will make you achieve your target. You will also come in contact with lot of like-minded people. Your hard work will be duly rewarded. Some of your long-lasting worries will come to an end. You will meet some VIP through telecommunication channel which may prove to be very fruitful later. You will be able to solve your private and personal problems by your tact and tenacity.

**Pisces : (February 19 - March 20)** It is going to be a favorable week. You will have promising results at your workplace. Health will be fine. You will do your routine work. Enemies and foes won't be able to damage your interest. Friend's help will make you achieve your target. You will also come in contact with lot of like-minded people. Your hard work will be duly rewarded. Some of your long-lasting worries will come to an end. You will meet some VIP through telecommunication channel which may prove to be very fruitful later. You will be able to solve your private and personal problems by your tact and tenacity.

# The Epstein files: Who decides what info is released to public?

One of the hardest tasks of any government in a democracy is balancing the right to know against the need to know. Just because the public wants to know something doesn't necessarily mean that they should. But without this access to information, how can voters make informed choices and the powerful be held to account? This debate is now central to the release and redaction of the Epstein files.

For the past decade or so, the Epstein files have been used by Democrats and Republicans as a political stick with which to beat each other. In the meantime, speculation has run rife online with a global guessing game of what these files contain and who is or isn't named in them.

This is the dilemma facing the Trump administration at the moment. On the one hand, there is justifiable public anger that they have not been told the truth, and that some of the richest and most powerful people in the world may have committed terrible crimes with impunity. This fury â? and its political implications â? is the chief reason why the US Congress voted in November 2025 to release the Epstein files.

What is often missed in this discussion is the fact that the files are not a single set of documents. Instead, these are multiple packages of information, including files gathered by the FBI investigation, court records and grand jury documents. This distinction is extremely important legally.

Of the documents that have been made available so far, many of these have been heavily redacted with black bars covering names, addresses, emails and photos. In some cases, it is clear why this has happened. In others, the absence of any reason for the redaction has simply added fuel to the fire, with spectators filling in the blanks themselves.

The US has long prided itself on being one of the freest societies on Earth. Since the Watergate scandal seriously dented public confidence in government integrity, various pieces of landmark legislation have been passed to make sure government files can be made available to the public. These include the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) of 1966, the Electronic FOIA Amend-

ments of 1996, and the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016.

These acts cover the federal government, including the FBI and the Department of Justice, which have been overseeing the Epstein case. But there has also been legislation that has limited what can be released. This includes the Privacy Act of 1974. This legislation was designed to ensure that random members of the public do not have their names released and their reputations damaged.

Given the number of government agencies that can be involved, this process has not always been consistent. One agency might redact one part of a document, while another might redact a separate part. In some cases, documents might be redacted despite the fact that they are already publicly available.

Because the process is so legally and politically complicated, the work is normally done by civil servants in the federal bureaucracy. But it should also be remembered that some files and information are not covered by the freedom of information laws. The two most significant are probably court and grand jury records. These records can only be released by judges, and due to the separation of powers, Congress has no jurisdiction here.

The Freedom of Information Act gives several important reasons why files might be redacted. The trouble is that without explanation, it's difficult to know which ones apply. The first and most obvious is national security. If an agency feels that the release of any particular information might damage America's reputation, they have sweeping powers to withhold information.

This applies even if the information doesn't mention specific things such as the names of undercover agents, details of troop movements or programmes that could be harmed, but does include important information on how agencies operate. Other information can be redacted if it includes financial data or patents.

Perhaps the most significant are redactions covered by the Privacy Act of 1974. These can include third parties (people simply c'd into emails or in the background of photos who are of no relevance to

the investigation), addresses, phone numbers and â? crucially in this case â? the names of victims and witnesses.

In the case of the Epstein files, this means that, rightly, a lot of information has been blacked out (although there are reports that a few of the victims have been named and, in some cases, their addresses and even photos have been published).

## Striking a balance

Critics have argued that the public needs to be given greater context about the redactions. Namely, who gets to decide what is redacted and why. Whether, for example, a person whose name is blacked out is a potential perpetrator, a crucial witness or an innocent third party.

The issue is made more complicated by the fact that, for law enforcement reasons, court cases resulting from some of this information are likely to proceed. So it's important not to release information that could compromise investigations or future trials.

All of this is impossible to challenge without knowing the background details.

Because Epstein was such a prominent figure and seemed to know everyone in positions of power, it's possible that information is being redacted for all of these reasons.

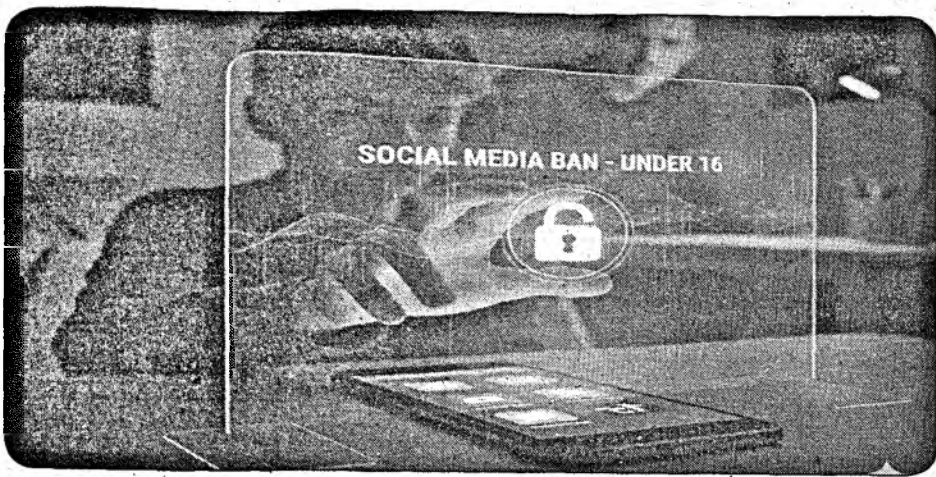
Assuming good faith on all sides (not always easy in today's political climate in the US), this leaves government officials with a dilemma. While justice demands that innocent people's reputations are protected, it equally demands that the public's right â? and need â? to know is properly served.

All of which must be balanced by the need to ensure that the right people, no matter how powerful or influential, involved in any wrongdoing revealed in the files, are held accountable.

At this stage, it seems likely that the debate over what should be made public and what should remain secret will run on indefinitely. (*The Conversation*)

Author: Matthew Mokhefi-Ashton, Nottingham Trent University

# Does banning access to social media for minors protect them?



The age restriction for access to social media has been at the centre of political debate in Spain in recent days. It is an extremely complex issue that requires a thoughtful and evidence-based approach.

Although the announcement by the Spanish Prime Minister is new, in reality, the EU General Data Protection Regulation, in force since 2018, allows the legal capacity to consent to the processing of our data in digital services to be set between the ages of 13 and 16. In Spain, it was decided that it would be from the age of 14.

It is necessary to understand the facts that brought us to this point and the set of measures that should accompany this limitation.

The duty to verify age was regulated in the US by the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998, and in Spain by the LOPD Regulation of 2007.

This verification obligation has been practically ignored by all operators, except for the efforts of the Spanish company Tuenti.

In the case of social media, the European Union has been meeting with technology companies since Viviane Reding's vice-presidency,

and agreements and corporate commitments have been adopted without any practical results. Currently, the platforms have gone from an indifferent acceptance of regulation to total opposition.

Several reports, such as those produced by EU Kids Online, have consistently noted the significant increase in internet risks for minors.

There is a steady decline in the age at which young people and children connect to the internet, own a mobile phone, consume pornography, or register on a social network.

The recent UNICEF report on the impact of technology on childhood and adolescence confirms this trend with worrying data pointing to additive use of smartphones and social networks, increased conflict or exposure to pornography, accompanied by demands for education and even disconnection.

The diagnosis in the report promoted by the Spanish Ministry of Youth and Children is devastating. It points out that social networks generate a high-risk context for the mental and physical health of minors, including overexposure to harassment

and crimes against sexual freedom, access to pornography, and the acquisition of harmful habits and behaviours.

This coincides with studies that have been warning about the increase in mental illnesses, self-harm, and suicide among children and adolescents. Social networks can replace face-to-face experiences and reduce spaces for autonomous socialisation, especially with intensive use.

## A business model that seeks engagement

Several data leaks seem to prove that social media platforms are fully aware of the risks of their business model and yet continue to promote it. Social networks take advantage of reward mechanisms that generate dependence.

These mechanisms are accentuated by endless scrolling, hyperstimulation, and nighttime use, which can impair sleep hygiene.

Each like, emoji, chat, or image filter serves a clear purpose: to promote engagement, maintain user attention, and monetise privacy.

Furthermore, personalisation algorithms favour user "engagement" and provide a

view of reality through filters that generate a bubble of personalised content.

Meanwhile, advertising monetisation seems to encourage polarisation, hate speech, denialism, or pornography.

## Social and administrative responsibilities

On the other hand, it is undeniable that there is a share of social and administrative responsibility. A child's or adolescent's first contact with a social network is usually promoted by their own parents or the school, for example, by purchasing a smartphone for them or assigning digital tasks.

The lack of educational tools for families and the pressure they feel when, from a certain age, their sons and daughters face ostracism and isolation if they are not on a social network, means that digital identity in the early years depends on adults without sufficient support and on school practices that are sometimes not very reflective or contradictory to the protection of childhood, such as the publication of videos on school social networks.

## To legislate beyond prohibition

In this context, the legislative action undertaken by the Spanish Ministry of Youth and Children is appropriate. It seems urgent to legislate with effective, proportionate measures and guarantees that ensure the right to digital identity for our children and adolescents.

The age limit is fully justified in guaranteeing the proper development of their personality.

But this should not be the only measure. A holistic project is needed that includes

proactive public policies and, at the same time, defines accountability scenarios.

From a legal standpoint, an approach that reinforces deterrence is essential, including, if necessary, increased civil and criminal liability. At the same time, it is necessary to regulate the actions of schools and their responsibility.

## The voice of those concerned

And there is another risk we cannot ignore. Children and adolescents must have a voice.

We must understand how to enable socialisation and learning about technology inspired by democratic and inclusive values. We cannot fall victim to regulatory urgency and focus exclusively on prohibition.

We live in a society of artificial intelligence (AI). It is necessary that we adopt a new way of doing things and new capabilities. We are not at war with technology, but with an antisocial use that commodifies people.

Finally, the regulators most directly involved (Spanish Data Protection Agency, National Markets and Competition Commission, and Spanish Artificial Intelligence Supervisory Agency) must move from recommendations to oversight, enforcement, and sanctions against the platforms.

The time for temporising is over. There is a firm will on the part of platform leaders to threaten and break the regulations.

Democracy has made us free and transformed us from subjects into citizens: let us not allow ourselves to be turned into digital servants, starting with our sons, daughters, and young people. (The Conversation)

# AI-powered stethoscopes show promise in bridging screening gaps

As tuberculosis (TB) continues as the deadliest infectious cause of deaths globally, a new study has shown that artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled digital stethoscopes can help fill critical screening gaps, especially in hard-to-reach areas.

In a commentary published in the journal *Med (Cell Press)*, global experts contended that stethoscopes combined with digital technology and AI can be a better option against the challenges faced in screening programmes, such as under-detection, high cost, and inequitable access.

"AI-enabled digital stethoscopes have demonstrated promising accuracy and feasibility for detecting lung and cardiovascular abnormalities, with promising results in early TB studies.

Training and validation in diverse, high-burden settings are essential to explore the potential of this tool further," said corresponding author Madhukar Pai from McGill University, Canada, along

with researchers from the UAE, Germany, and Switzerland.

Despite advancements in screening and diagnostic tools, an estimated 2.7 million people with TB were missed by current screening programmes, as per data from the World Health Organization (WHO).

Routine symptom screening is also likely to miss people with asymptomatic or subclinical TB. While the WHO recently recommended several AI-powered computer-aided detection (CAD) software, as well as ultra-portable radiography hardware, higher operating costs and upfront hardware act as a deterrent.

This particularly appeared difficult in primary care settings and or among pregnant women due to radiation concerns.

At the same time, AI showed significant potential for screening, including applications beyond CAD of TB from radiographs, said the researchers.

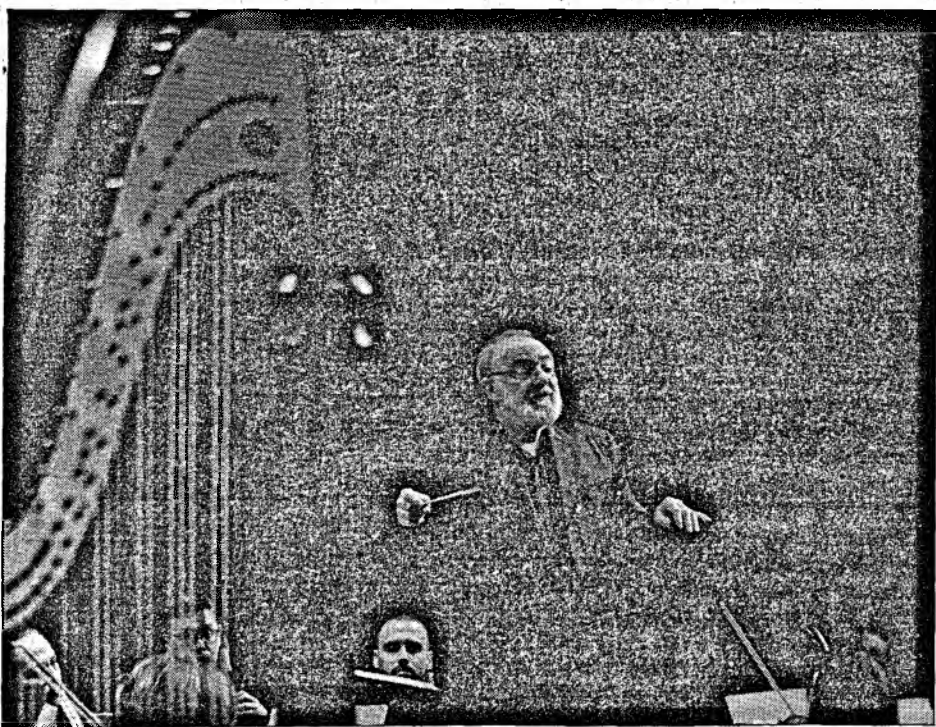
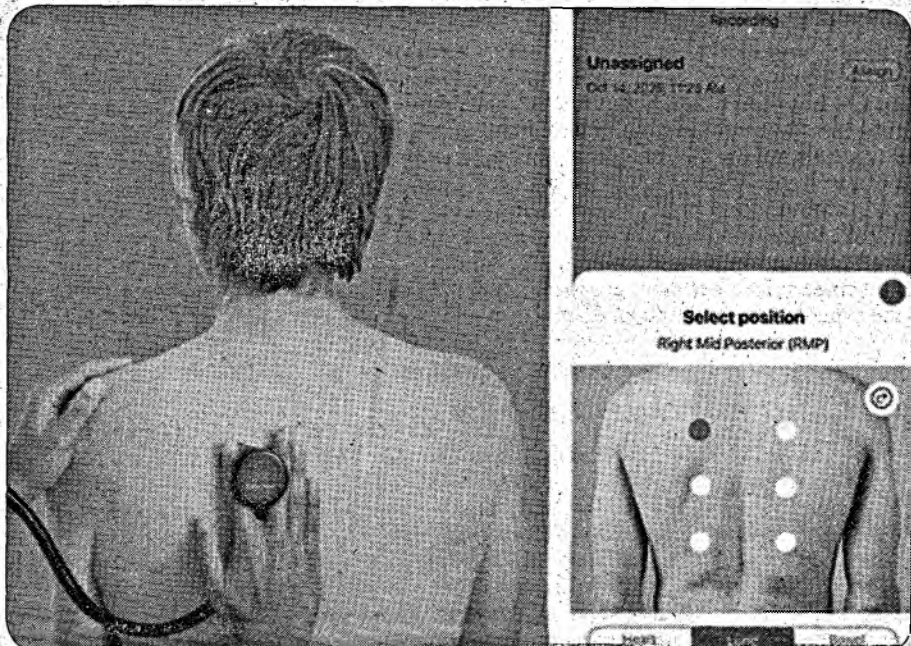
"One application of AI

for disease screening is to interpret acoustic (sound) biomarkers of disease, with potential to identify sounds that appear nonspecific or are inaudible to the human ear," they added, while highlighting the potential of AI in detecting and interpreting cough biomarkers and lung auscultation to analyse breath sounds.

Studies from high-TB burden countries, including India, Peru, South Africa, Uganda, and Vietnam, highlighted that AI-enabled auscultation could hold promise as a TB screening and triage tool.

"AI digital stethoscopes may become useful alternatives to imaging-based approaches for TB screening, with the potential to democratise access to care for populations underserved by radiography," the researchers said.

Importantly, AI digital stethoscopes offer a scalable, low-cost, and person-centered tool that could bring us closer to reaching TB case finding goals," they added. (ANS)



Chief Conductor of Symphony Orchestra of India Martyn Brabbins performs during an event to mark 20 years of the Symphony Orchestra of India, at NCPA, in Mumbai, on Saturday. (PTI)

## EJH orders manhunt for...

(Contd from P-1) It warns that any violation will result in strict penal action as the state attempts to prove the rule of law still applies in the Jaintia coal belt.

In response to the incident, the East Jaintia Hills District Administration has intensified enforcement against illegal mining. Five teams, comprising Executive Magistrates, police, and officials from the Directorate of Mineral Resources, have been deployed to conduct drives across the region.

During recent operations, authorities seized approximately 3,197 MT of coal from nine locations in Umlawang and 351 MT from four locations in Umthe. These actions follow a similar drive on February 6, where 3,356 MT of coal, along with tools and equipment, were seized along the Sakhain-Thangsko road. Authorities also identified and destroyed makeshift camps used for illegal mining. FIRs have been registered, and further legal action is under way.

## Call to suspend govt events...

(Contd from P-1) At the same time, Sawkmie urged both the state and central governments to find effective measures to permanently stop illegal coal mining in the state.

The tragic incident occurred at Thangsko village in East Jaintia Hills, and as of Friday, the confirmed death toll stood at 27.

## Congress joins chorus...

(Contd from P-1) "How can the Chief Minister continue to lead the state when, time and again, tragic incidents involving loss of lives occur in coal mines?" Basaiawmoit asked, adding, "How many more precious lives must be lost? Hundreds have already died over the years."

He noted that Thursday's explosion was not an isolated incident, recalling past disasters caused by mine flooding, collapses, and other hazards in Meghalaya. The cumulative death toll from such incidents, he said, remains staggering, renewing the VPP's call for accountability at the highest level.

## KSU ejects 11 non-documented workers...

(Contd from P-1) As they lacked valid documents, the union sent them back to their place of origin. The KSU also warned people who regularly bring non-local labourers into the area without proper documents, stating that strict action would be taken against anyone found violating the rules.

# No clarity on whether India will stop buying Russian crude oil

NEW DELHI, Feb 7: India on Saturday neither confirmed nor denied if it has decided to stop procuring Russian crude oil after the US rolled back a punitive 25 per cent tariff it had slapped on Indian goods over New Delhi's purchases of petroleum products from Russia.

US President Donald Trump signed an executive order removing the 25 per cent additional tariff.

The move came days after the US president announced a trade deal with India and said that Washington would slash the tariffs on Indian goods to 18 per cent from 50 per cent in exchange for India halting Russian oil purchases and lowering trade barriers.

"Specifically, India has committed to stop directly or

indirectly importing Russian Federation oil, has represented that it will purchase United States energy products from the United States, and has recently committed to a framework with the United States to expand defence cooperation over the next 10 years," Trump said in the executive order.

If the US Secretary of Commerce finds that India has resumed directly or indirectly importing Russian oil, Trump's team shall recommend "whether and to what extent I should take additional action as to India, including whether I should reimpose the additional ad valorem rate of duty of 25 per cent on imports of articles of India," the order said.

However, there was no

clear response by Indian officials to Trump's comments that India is stopping the purchase of Russian crude oil.

When asked about Trump's assertion, an official referred to the remarks made by External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal on Thursday.

"Insofar as India's energy sourcing is concerned, the government has stated publicly on several occasions that ensuring the energy security of 1.4 billion Indians is the supreme priority of the government," Jaiswal had said.

"Diversifying our energy sourcing in keeping with objective market conditions and evolving international dynamics is at the core of our strategy to ensure this. All of India's actions are taken

and will be taken with this in mind," he said.

India's purchase of Russian oil had become a thorny issue in ties between New Delhi and Washington with many American officials alleging that it is fuelling Moscow's war machine against Ukraine.

New Delhi rejected the charges maintaining that its energy procurement is driven by national interests and market dynamics.

India turned to purchasing Russian oil sold at a discount after Western countries imposed sanctions on Moscow and shunned its supplies over its invasion of Ukraine in February, 2022.

India's procurement of Russian crude oil has seen a sharp fall in the last few weeks. (PTI)

# 2 dead, several feared trapped as 3-storey building collapses in Rajasthan

JAIPUR, Feb 7: At least two people were killed and several others feared trapped when a three-storey building collapsed in Rajasthan's Kota on Saturday night, officials said.

The incident occurred in the Talwandi area, where a restaurant was operating in the building. Police and rescue teams rushed to the spot and launched a rescue operation.

Calling it a "major accident", Rajasthan Cabinet Minister Madan Dilawar said, "There is information of two deaths so far, and nine people were hospitalised. Four of them are still in the hospital, while around four have either shifted to a private hospital or gone home." The cause of the collapse is being investigated, and a rescue operation is underway, he added.

According to initial information, some customers and employees were present in the restaurant at the time of the collapse.

Local MLA Sandeep Sharma, who reached the spot soon after the incident, said the building collapsed suddenly and there was a possibility that more people were trapped under the debris.

"Rescue operations are underway and some people have been pulled out," he said.

Earlier, District Collector Piyush Samaria told reporters that teams were deployed immediately after the collapse.

"We received information about the building collapse, and rescue operations were started without delay. Five people have been rescued and shifted to the hospital so far. At this stage, it is not possible to confirm how many people are still trapped," he said. (PTI)

# Global engagement inevitable but should not be driven by pressure, tariffs: Bhagwat

MUMBAI, Feb 7: Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat on Saturday said that global engagement was inevitable, but it should not happen under anyone's pressure or be driven by tariffs.

He also urged people to purchase products keeping in mind how it can boost employment opportunities in the country.

Bhagwat was speaking at a programme titled '100 years of the Sangh journey' here to mark the RSS's centenary.

"People should think about how their choices support employment in the country. Global engagement, wherever necessary, should be carried out in a way that suits India's interests and environment, and should not be tariff-driven," he said.

"There are many foreign-made commodities, the use of which we can avoid in our daily life. At the same time, there are several Indian-made products, which are better than those made in foreign countries. We have

to purchase goods thinking how our country's employment will grow. Global engagement, which is inevitable, should be done without coming under anyone's pressure and should not be tariff-driven," the RSS chief said.

His statement comes days after Congress accused the BJP-led Union government of buckling under the US pressure to finalise a trade deal and compromising on the interests of Indian farmers in the process.

Bollywood star Salman Khan, filmmaker Subhash Khan, lyricist and writer Prasoon Joshi, actor and BJP MP Hema Malini and actors Ranbir Kapoor and Poonam Dhillon were among those present for Bhagwat's lecture on day one of the two-day event which seeks to reflect on the journey of RSS, its role in society, and the ideas and perspectives shaping its future.

Speaking about RSS which was founded in 1925, Bhagwat said it does not seek power or aim to become a "pressure group", but its objective is to unite society.

Dr Keshav Baliram Hedgewar identified several shortcomings in society including the lack of unity and it finally led him to found Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in 1925, he said.

The RSS long ago decided that it would not take up any work other than the unification of society, and once that task is achieved, it would not pursue any other agenda, Bhagwat said.

Many people believe that Narendra Modi is the Prime Minister because of the RSS, he said, adding that while Modi leads a political party and many RSS volunteers are active in public life, "the political party is a separate entity and not an organ of the RSS." The RSS was not "against anyone" and did not work as a reaction to any incident, Bhagwat said, adding that its focus was supporting and strengthening positive efforts underway in the country.

A line from the Bible could also be applied to the RSS that "it has come to fulfil, not to destroy", Bhagwat said. (PTI)

"Youth is the gift of nature, but age is a work of art."  
—Stanislaw Jerzy Lec

## The Shillong Times

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### RSS and society

THE Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is known for its calculated engineering of the political and social landscapes to its ultimate advantage. Yet, it would often appear that it professes one thing and practises quite the opposite. The dichotomy is inescapable. At an event marking the centenary year of the RSS, its chief Mohan Bhagwat held forth in Mumbai this weekend; and his speech only reinforced such perceptions about the well-knit organisation. He reiterated that "the RSS is not against anyone, it does not want power and its objective is only to unite society." In the same breath, he also stressed on unity of Hindus, noting that the RSS was founded by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar in 1925 after "identifying a lack of unity in society." Notably, Hedgewar wanted Hindus to unite as a powerful entity to protect the freedom that India won from the British. A society is formed of its parts, which are not confined to one religion, even as Hindus are the dominant religion here. There is no whole without its parts.

Facts speak for themselves. The RSS is the ideological grandmaster of the ruling BJP. The two are united in promoting the cause of Hindutva, they work in close coordination at the organisational level and share a cultural bond rooted in nationalism. RSS is believed to dictate policy to the ruling dispensations led by the BJP, even as there's a veil of secrecy surrounding such involvements. Both the entities work in tandem, with the Modi government implementing the RSS agenda in stages while seemingly maintaining an independent identity. The new national education policy, for instance, drew flak for its attempts to incorporate contentious RSS viewpoints in the syllabus. However, Bhagwat takes the stand that the BJP is "not our party." The aim might be to distance itself from the flaws of the government. Narendra Modi as prime minister cannot afford to distance himself from his RSS roots or the role of the Pracharak that he had once donned. Politically, he is the "creation" of the RSS as a national hero to effect a change of government at the Centre in 2014. The RSS worked from behind in uplifting Modi from the post of Gujarat chief minister and fielding him as the "PM face" for the BJP-led NDA's electoral fight for a parliamentary majority.

Bhagwat's speech this time again is noted for its emphasis on Hindu unity. The RSS, he stressed, does not think in terms of caste — a toxic system that divides Hindus into multiple layers and discriminates between them. He claimed anyone from any caste can become the RSS chief; SC-ST is no disqualification; and Brahmin no qualification. He claimed the RSS works for all castes, though its ranks "were earlier filled with Brahmins." Admittedly, much water has flown down the Ganges in the past 100 years. RSS obviously prompted installation of non-Brahmins as CMs and a non-Brahmin as the PM. The post-Mandal phase of politics in the northern belt dictated as much. The RSS changed with the times; and it needs to change much more to see and treat the society as a unified whole.

# When Governing Becomes Performance Art and Citizens Become Spectators

By Napoleon S Mawphniang

Fellow Meghalayans, you know what I mean. They are only giving it ten days total. Seven of those for whatever the government wants to push through. Then three days left for other things, I guess. Ten days. For everything. The budget gets pushed through on the 20th. Speaker says they'll extend sessions till 3 PM if needed. Very generous.

Except—and maybe I'm just cynical after watching this circus for too long—isn't that exactly the point? This manufactured scarcity of time, this theatrical urgency... it's not a bug, friends. It's the entire operating system.

Take a moment to consider Fabius Maximus. The Roman commander refused to confront Hannibal's superior forces head-on. He used strategic procrastination to evade, postpone, and wear down his opponent. Excellent military strategy. Our government has also learned this tactic, but they have completely changed the course of events. They're hurrying to avoid being examined, not waiting to become stronger. Because consideration leads to scrutiny, and scrutiny breeds scrutiny? For princes who rule with more ambition than solutions, that is poison.

The 10 days to finally address the Inner Line Permit that civil society has been screaming about for years. Ten days to discuss the Rs 2,366 crore road scandal—yes, you read that right—where nine officials got charged with corruption, and the highway connecting Shillong to Tura still sits unfinished since its 2010 inception. A decade and a half. Billions of rupees. One incomplete road. But sure, ten days should cover it.

Machiavelli knew. He wrote in *The Prince* that "the promise given was a necessity of the past: the word broken is a necessity of the present." God, that stings to read now. The Inner Line Permit—that constitutional safeguard the Khasi Students' Union keeps demanding, that the Voice of the People Party won't shut up about (and rightly so), that civil society organizations have been pushing for—it just hangs there. Unfulfilled. The government "explores" ILP-like alternatives," they tell us. Watered-down mechanisms. Half-measures that satisfy absolutely no one but let them claim they're doing something without actually doing anything.

Have you heard the term "manufacturing consent"?

A book about it was written by Herman and Chomsky. Controlling the framework in which people can even speak is more important than controlling what they say. They guarantee that consent is never freely given by packing everything into ten hurried days and devoting only seven to government business when we're dealing with existential issues like tribal autonomy, demographic survival, and systematic corruption eating away at us from the inside out. It's designed and produced by starving people of time.

And the Sixth Schedule versus Article 371 debate? This thing that's tearing our autonomous district councils apart? The VPP says—and they're not wrong—that Paragraph 12A of the Sixth Schedule lets state laws override council regulations. Basically neutering indigenous self-governance. They want Article 371 to actually strengthen tribal authority. The UDP, Congress, BJP... they say no, Sixth Schedule is fine. Paul Lyngdoh asks why Ladakh would want Sixth Schedule protections if Article 371 were so superior.

These are massive constitutional questions. They deserve weeks of deliberation. Expert testimony. Public consultations. Town halls. Instead they'll get squeezed into a session specifically designed to prevent exactly that kind of deep examination.

Aristotle taught that the polis—the community—exists not merely to live, but to live well. Can anyone here honestly say we're living well? The 2025 budget speech bragged about "reversal of fortunes." Meanwhile our education system limps along, healthcare remains a cruel joke for most people, road infrastructure crumbles when it exists at all, traffic strangles Shillong daily, and corruption allegations grow like mushrooms after rain.

That 2010 road project... let's talk about that for a minute because it makes my blood boil. Started at Rs 1,303 crore. Somehow—mysteriously, magically—ballooned to Rs 2,366 crore through "revisions." The FIR filed by PWD Chief Engineer AM Kharmawphlang doesn't mince words. Senior engineers and private contractors from Telangana and Haryana allegedly "fabricated records, engaged in cheating, and adopted corrupt means causing huge losses to the public

exchequer." This isn't ancient history requiring archaeological excavation. This is recent. This is our money. This is now. Will the Assembly spend adequate time investigating how billions meant for basic infrastructure vanished into private pockets? Or will this too get rushed past in the avalanche of a ten-day session?

Socrates said something about a life without real questioning not being worth much. I guess that applies to how we run things in government too.

This whole assembly thing just doesn't give enough time or openness for any kind of proper look at stuff. The speaker mentions problems with the schedule and says they'll be more flexible. But honestly, that sounds like just talking without doing anything.

If they actually wanted people to have a say, they'd block out twenty days at least. Or thirty, whatever it needs to feel like real democracy. It seems kind of off how they skip that part.

Instead we get this—what Chomsky called "the engineering of consent." Creating conditions where opposition looks unreasonable. Where demands for thoroughness seem obstructionist. Where later they can claim "we had a session, we discussed these matters, the opposition participated" while knowing the whole apparatus was rigged from the start to produce predetermined outcomes.

The autonomous district council situation is what kills me. BJP's Bernard Marak accused Congress and NPP of scuttling the 2014 Agreed Text for Settlement. The thirteen major departments have not been transferred to the ADCs as agreed. No meetings for five years. The state departments have "hijacked" funds allocated to the councils. This is not a matter of mere administrative glitches but a deliberate breach of trust in tribal self-rule. But where, in this ten-day blitz, will the MLAs find the time to probe whether contractors with ties to the ruling party actually did "mismanage special package funds" as Marak has accused?

The Hynniewtrep Integrated Territorial Organization has written to Amit Shah, requesting an extension of the ILP to "improve border security, protect the indigenous population, preserve the demographic balance,

and facilitate the identification of anti-national persons." These are not paranoid delusions but very real fears for a country where the indigenous population feels its homeland drifting away. The government's answer to this? "ILP-like" alternatives. The political equivalent of holding out a picture of water to a man dying of thirst.

Machiavelli knew that sometimes it is appearances that count more than reality when it comes to politics. And the NPP... with 53% of our assembly seats, they have no Lok Sabha members. One Rajya Sabha member. Their ambitions far outstrip their power. Perhaps that is why the governance is so rushed and shallow—Conrad Sangma's focus is divided between consolidating power here and spreading throughout the Northeast. As reported by The Shillong Times in March of last year, "the growing criticism and failures of governance indicate a waning confidence in his leadership." The current majority may be merely providing "a false sense of security while opposition forces remain strategically silent, preparing for the future."

That silence from the Opposition, it seems like they might be playing some kind of long game. Like waiting for the government to mess up on its own with all these rushed meetings and promises that fall apart. Then they can jump in when people are really fed up.

The February assembly thing, it's not really about democracy or anything. More like a show they put on to look busy. They set it up so tight with the schedule that nothing gets done for real. No one has to answer for stuff. I think the short time is on purpose, not just some accident.

We are stuck watching this, the regular people. Supposed to clap along and not pay attention to what's missing. Those big issues about control over our lives, the money and land we have, what comes next for everyone. They stay off the table, not even brought up. It feels kind of frustrating, like no one cares to dig into it.

Plato warned that democracy could collapse into tyranny when citizens stop thinking critically. This ten-day assembly session is our test. Will we accept the performance... or demand an actual reckoning?

(The author is Advocate, Trade Unionist Ethicist & The Humanist Architect.)

## The Name "Jaintia": History, Ethnonym, and Identity

By Dr Omarlin Kyndiah

At the outset, one must applaud H H Mohrmen for his deeply researched, articulate, and much-needed intervention in the ongoing debate surrounding the term *Jaintia*. His essay delivers an important corrective function: it rescues history from ignorance. At a time when labels are rejected without inquiry and identities are questioned without evidence, Mohrmen's write-up reminds us that history is not shaped by sentiment but by sources, continuity, and memory.

His central argument that *Jaintia* is neither a British invention nor a non-indigenous imposition is historically sound and convincingly demonstrated. Indeed, the tendency to blame the British for the name reflects not colonial critique but historical unfamiliarity. As Mohrmen shows, the British merely encountered, recorded, and administratively reorganised a political and cultural reality that already existed.

What further strengthens this position is the much older ethnological and migratory history of the Jaintia people, which long predates both the Jaintia plains kingdom and British intervention.

According to R. M. Nath (*North East India: Gateway to Glory*), the original homeland of the Austric peoples to whom the Mon-Khmer speaking groups of Northeast India belong is broadly traced by scholars to northern Indo-China. These Austric peoples were not a single tribe but a constellation of related groups: Khos, Synteng, Kol, Gond, Moria, Munda, among others. One such group, referred to in early records as T'sin-taing or T'sin-tein, migrated southward from China. Over time, this group came to be known as Zytien or Synteng, and in its later historical articulation, as Jaintia. This is a crucial point: *Jaintia* is not an alien label imposed from outside, but the historical evolution of an indigenous ethnonym.

R. M. Nath further records that these early Jaintia groups first settled in Kamarupa (present-day Guwahati). Pressured by raids and territorial expansion from Indo-Aryan Brahmanical powers, they migrated eastward to the banks of the Kolong River, and later moved south to establish a flourishing agricultural civilisation in the fertile Kupli Valley, known in oral memory as Kremlamet, located in present-day North Cachar Hills. It was here that the Jaintia people laid the foundations of an early political formation locally remembered as Jaintia long before the rise of the historical Jaintia kingdom of the plains. Chinese historical records lend external corroboration to this early polity. The *Shung-Shu* (420–479 AD) records that the kingdom of Kae-pih-le (identified with Kupli) sent an ambassador to China in 428 AD, indicating a politically organised Jaintia state with diplomatic reach in the early fifth century.

The French scholar Jean Przyluski adds another layer of insight by noting that Austric migrations often occurred in organised batches under a recognised leader. Jaintia oral traditions are entirely consistent with this pattern. Folklore speaks of the great leader U Lakriah, who guided his people during their migrations. The well-known myth of U Nlaw Wasa (the Seven Huts) descending through Ka Tangnoob Tangri (the Golden Ladder) is not mere fantasy but part of a shared Austric cosmological recollection, closely connected to the wider Hynniewtrep origin narrative. As with all myths, these stories emerged in an age before formal historiography, yet they encode migration, leadership, and settlement in symbolic form.

Linguistic scholarship further dismantles the claim that *Jaintia* is non-indigenous. Sumit Kumar Chatterjee persuasively argues that *Jaintia* is derived from *Synteng*. He observes: "The form *Synteng* gives the modern pronunciation of the word, but it is quite in the nature of things that an earlier pronunciation was *Zainten*. It was thus easy for *Synteng* = *Zainten* or *Zanten* to be Sanskritised by the Aryan speakers as *Jayanta* or *Jayanti*."

This linguistic lineage is further elaborated by Prof. B. Pakem in his paper "Sources of the Early History of the Jaintias," published in *Sources of the History of India, Volume II* (Institute of Historical Studies, Calcutta, 1979). Pakem notes that the term *Synteng* itself has multiple indigenous explanations. One view

holds that when the Sutnga kings ruled over their subjects in the plains, the latter mispronounced the name Sutnga; even today, plains people pronounce it as Suteng-ga, a phonetic shift that eventually produced the term Synteng for the hill people. Another version attributes the name to U Chitang Kongor, the Sutnga general who annexed the southern plains, from whom the plains population came to refer to the hill people as *Synteng*. A third tradition traces the name to the ancestral mother Ka Tein (Teng in Khasi), one of the twelve children of Ka Lakdaka and U Luh Ryndi, from whom the Jaintias are said to have derived the appellation Synteng.

This linguistic evolution explains the transition from Synteng to Jaintia. In this context, it is important to note that alternative views deriving the name Jaintia from the goddess Jayantesvari Devi, from Puranic or Tantric literature, or from interactions with subject populations in the plains remain debated and inconclusive, and do not displace the stronger linguistic and ethnological evidence for an indigenous origin later Sanskritised through cultural contact. It must also be clearly realised that the name Jaintia predates later political and religious expressions such as *Jayantiapur*, *Jaintia Parganas*, *Jayantipur*, *Janteswari*, or *Jayanti Devi*. These were subsequent developments administrative, dynastic, or religious built upon an already existing ethnonym. The name Jaintia was therefore foundational, not derivative.

Even more striking is the suggestion supported by Chinese records that the Jaintia kingdom may correspond to the ancient Kingdom of Kae-pih-le (or Kapi), which would place Jaintia political history as early as 428 AD. If this identification holds, then the Jaintia polity predates many better-known kingdoms of the region by centuries.

Material evidence also supports the antiquity and territorial extent of the Jaintia Kingdom. R. M. Nath records the discovery of a stone boundary pillar marking the jurisdiction of the Jaintia Kingdom up to Jamunagaon. This pillar was found in the reserve forest on the bank of the Jamuna River and has since been preserved in the small museum at Nagaon. Such tangible archaeological evidence decisively refutes the claim that Jaintia political identity was a late or colonial construct.

Historical sources further indicate that the name Jaintia was already being used to describe Mon-Khmer-speaking peoples of the Kupli Valley when they established their first organised kingdom there. The subsequent extension of hill rule into the plains and the establishment of Jaintiapur as a capital therefore represented not a shift in identity, but the reaffirmation of an older ethnonym within a new political geography.

Seen in this broader frame, Mohrmen's conclusion becomes inescapable:

*Jaintia* is not a colonial label, not a non-tribal name, and certainly not an insult to indigenous identity. It is a name shaped by migration, language, myth, political power, and historical continuity.

To reject the term Jaintia today is therefore not an act of decolonisation; it is an act of historical erasure. Mohrmen's essay deserves appreciation precisely because it urges us to replace discomfort with understanding, and sentiment with scholarship. History, whether we like it or not, does not disappear by denial, it only waits to be rediscovered. It must also be acknowledged that the term "Jaintia" and the history of its people constitute one of the most researched and debated subjects among the hill tribes of Northeast India, engaging historians, linguists, ethnographers, and archaeologists across generations. Yet, despite this substantial body of scholarship, much of Jaintia history remains fragmentary and obscured by the limitations of early sources.

The present submission, therefore, does not claim finality. Rather, it underscores the need for continued inquiry using modern historical methods: critical historiography, archaeology, linguistics, and interdisciplinary research to uncover new evidence and throw further light on the still obscure and deeply layered history of the Jaintia people.

### How many deaths will it take for illegal mining to cease?

Editor,  
The recent dynamite blast in an illegal rat-hole coal mine in Meghalaya's East Jaintia Hills on February 5 has claimed at least 25 lives, with rescue efforts still under way to pull out trapped workers. This tragedy, involving mostly migrant labourers from Assam and Nepal, underscores the persistent peril of unregulated mining in a state where such accidents are alarmingly routine. Despite a decade-old ban, these death traps persist—begging the question: who is truly responsible?

Primarily, the mine owners and operators must be held accountable. Two individuals have already been arrested in connection with this incident — a step in the right direction. Their flagrant violation of safety norms, using explosives in cramped, unstable tunnels, directly caused the explosion. But individual culpability only scratches the surface. The deeper rot lies in systemic failures.

Where are the so-called NGOs championing workers' rights and environmental justice? Organizations that once vocally protested mining hazards seem conspicuously absent amid this crisis. While some activists had raised alarms about prior deaths just weeks before this blast, the broader NGO community—often quick to litigate on other fronts—has not mounted a sustained

campaign to expose the illegal networks or support affected families. Their silence risks complicity in a cycle of exploitation.

Equally puzzling is the National Green Tribunal's (NGT) inertia. The NGT imposed a blanket ban on rat-hole mining in 2014, citing environmental and safety risks, yet enforcement remains a mirage. Why hasn't the tribunal cracked down with stricter monitoring or penalties? Recent warnings from a retired judge and activist went unheeded, highlighting how NGT orders gather dust while lives are lost.

Finally, the Meghalaya state government cannot evade scrutiny. Chief Minister Conrad Sangma has promised accountability and urged an end to illegal mining, but has the administration truly curbed it? Despite sporadic crackdowns, illegal operations thrive due to alleged political patronage, porous borders, and economic dependencies. The government's inability to implement scientific mining alternatives or rehabilitate miners speaks volumes. Prime Minister Modi's compensation announcement is welcome, but prevention, not payouts, is the need of the hour.

This blast isn't an isolated "accident"—it's a predictable outcome of neglect. Meghalaya must enforce the ban rigorously, NGOs must amplify their advocacy, and the NGT needs to wield its authority. Without collective action, more lives will be buried in the pursuit of coal.

Yours etc.,  
Anil Thapa,  
Via email

### Silence no longer golden

Editor,  
"A politician thinks of the next election. A statesman, of the next generation." —James Freeman Clarke.

Massive tranches of secrets overflowed as the Jeffrey Epstein files opened the Pandora's box. Julian Assange's Wikileaks had another story of its own. Whatever it is, the truth cannot be hidden for long, karma does find its way to haunt the wrongdoer. The 22,429 square kilometres state which has lofty dreams of a \$10 billion economy in the next five years was warned through the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) ('CAG warns Meghalaya's borrowing trend could lead to debt trap', The Hindu, March 31, 2023). Alarm bells are ringing recently through an RTI activist who laid down the CM's officers-on-special duty army, which draws lakhs and travels, the Forbes magazine style.

Questions galore arise as to why a Christian dominated state has dipped down the charts in its moral values and ethical way of living. The recent coal mine incident in East Jaintia Hills shows the deep state which we are entrenched in. The ruling elites have become carbon copies of Donald Trump and Putin. Observers have witnessed the gross misuse of intelligence agencies in the past, demonstrating that political masters can subvert the laws of the land for their own gain.

If at all Meghalaya is to elevate its position as the prime state in the Northeast, the mindset has to change, allowing for free speech. The intel-

ligentsia, media organisations, civil society organisations and whistleblowers should be protected and accountability must be demanded for the wrong choices or else the guillotine is not far from our reach.

Dave Berke, retired US Marine Corps officer and TOP-GUN Instructor in his book 'The Need to Lead' elaborates that the problem is always leadership and the action of a leader is to always take ownership.

Yours etc.,  
Christopher Gathpho,  
Shillong-10

### Online learning must stop

Editor,  
During the COVID-19 lockdowns, online classes gained prominence as the only viable means of ensuring continuity of learning. Due to this, smartphones, which were hitherto largely inaccessible to children, suddenly became indispensable tools for attending virtual classes, submitting assignments and interacting with teachers. Despite their clear utility during that time, this newfound access to smartphones by primary and middle school students had a dangerous consequence: widespread smartphone dependency and even smartphone addiction among this age group. After all, mobiles are notoriously addictive, snaring even well-knowing adults in hours of mindless scrolling. For children, whose brains are still developing, the dangers of high phone usage are dire, and can severely impact their development. As such, restricting phone access during childhood is key to protecting

our budding minds.

It is thus a serious cause for worry that even after the COVID lockdowns ended, this new digital mode of education did not vanish. Many teachers have continued to use digital platforms extensively for sharing homework, assignments, study materials and instructions. In several cases, students are even assigned due dates and submissions beyond school hours, thereby ensuring that the child has no choice but to use a smartphone to submit his/her work. As a direct result, parents are once again compelled to grant phone access to their children, re-exposing them to the same risks that arose during lockdown, and creating a potentially vicious cycle of phone use and addiction. It will thus not be unfair to infer that schools and teachers are, amongst other factors, partly responsible for the rise in mobile addiction amongst children. The effects of high screen time are of course well-known: diminished attention spans, sleep disorders, impaired emotional regulation, reduced capacity for social interaction and declining real-world engagement, all of which have long-term consequences on the mental health and psychological well-being of children.

What makes this more concerning is that, beyond the convenience of sharing some key resources, there is no statistical clarity as to how beneficial this deep use of mobiles and social media in education is, especially for schoolchildren who are already spending many hours of their day in physical classes. One should also bear in mind that, so far, classroom teaching remains the only legally recognized and accepted norm

of school education. There is no statutory mandate from the Education Department that permits schools to impart education through digital platforms in addition to normal classroom teaching. In this context, some serious questions arise which need to be answered. By what authority do schools and teachers continue to impose digital exposure to children, given it is harmful and potentially unlawful? On what legal basis do they extend school hours beyond the final bell through WhatsApp groups and chats?

Digital platforms should be restricted strictly to administrative communications such as informing parents about changes in class timings, holidays, examinations or events requiring parental presence.

As the new academic session in Meghalaya is about to commence, I earnestly urge the Hon'ble Education Minister and the State Education Department to take cognizance of this pressing issue. A clear balanced policy regarding the use of digital platforms in schools must be formulated and until that time, strict directives should be issued restricting schools from using these platforms for academic purposes. Should the Government fail to act, it is not unlikely that parents will be compelled to seek judicial intervention to safeguard the well-being of their children.

Yours etc.,  
NK Kehar  
Shillong-3

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

*"Leadership and learning  
are indispensable to each other."*

— John F. Kennedy

## The Shillong Times

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**Judicial Enquiry: Another Eyewash**  
CHIEF Minister, Conrad Sangma believes that by ordering a judicial enquiry into the dynamite blast at a coal mine in Thangsku at Mynsngat Village that claimed 27 lives recently, he would be able to divert public attention from the issue and the Government gets a breather. We all know the rigmarole of judicial enquiries in Meghalaya. Has there been a single judicial enquiry in the state's 54 year journey which has led to those responsible for criminal actions being punished? Not a single one! This enquiry too will die a natural death even while those who lost their lives would have died in vain. Rat hole coal mining is a dangerous activity and labourers put their lives on the line because they are starved of livelihoods. They don't have any rights because the coal business is illegal and coal barons exploit this to the hilt. Each time a miner goes into an underground hole to dig coal, he knows that he puts his life on the line. Chances are that water from adjoining abandoned mines could flood an active mine and the miners could drown to death as happened in Ksan, East Jaintia Hills in 2018. Then too the bodies of the miners had disintegrated and the search and rescue operation by the NDRF and the Indian Navy proved futile. That episode which claimed 15 lives should have resulted in the closure of all illegally run mines but it turned into another rigmarole.

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) which had banned coal mining in 2014, appointed the Justice BP Katakey Committee to take stock of the coal mined and allow for its auction under the supervision of Coal India Limited. While that auction ostensibly carried on, coal continued to be mined because the coal lobby actually funds elections and quite a few coal mining barons are part of the government. Everyone is in the know as to who these coal barons are who are termed as "high level" but neither the Opposition Parties nor the sundry pressure groups in Meghalaya have ever called out these mining barons because all benefit from this illegal trade. Even today, not a single note of protest is heard from these two-faced pressure groups which otherwise are hyper-active about controlling the influx of non-tribal labourers from other states and even from Bangladesh. The question is — Why this stunning silence? Had it been any other issue that claimed 27 lives at one go these same pressure groups would have come up with banners of protests.

This newspaper has consistently pointed out the venality that marks the politics of Meghalaya. About three weeks ago it was pointed out that several trucks belonging to the "high level" with modified carriers that extend the height of the trucks so they can carry loads of up to 150 tonnes were carrying coal and were all plying without registration numbers. The State Transport Department should have been held accountable for this gross act of defiance of the law that binds other citizens. But the Transport Department pretends it is blind and deaf and everyone knows why this is so. The Department of Weights and Measures too should have taken action but that is reserved for small offenders. And then we have the Police Department and the District Administration both of which seem to have taken a vow not to blow the whistle on this criminal act of illegal mining and transportation of coal. As for the judicial enquiry, some retired judge will be appointed and the enquiry will go down a cul-de-sac as had happened in the smart meter scam and the rice scam of the MDA-1 Government.

# Worldview of Collective Well-Being

By H. H. Mohrmen

The concept of the well-being of all, or the common good—ka bhalang ka imlang sahlang or ka bhalang uba bun balang—used to be at the very core of the worldview of the Khasi and Jaintia people of Meghalaya. It was a deeply rooted, community-centered philosophy that placed collective welfare above individual gain. This worldview emphasised that the survival, dignity, and prosperity of the individual were inseparable from the well-being of the community as a whole. For generations, this value system was shared by every member of the jaid-bynriew, or the community. However, as time passed and social structures have undergone significant changes, this profound worldview has been gradually pushed to the back-burner.

Like many indigenous peoples across the world, the Pnar and War communities have traditionally been close-knit societies. Living in intimate proximity to forests, rivers, and farmlands, they developed a deep and respectful relationship with nature. Their lives revolved around an understanding that human well-being and the sustainability of nature are interdependent. As such, the well-being of the community and the protection of the natural environment were seen not as separate concerns but as integral to their existence. It is for this reason that the common good and collective well-being came to define the worldview of the Pnar and War people, a worldview clearly reflected in their culture, religion, social institutions, and everyday practices.

The idea of the common good is not an abstract principle but a lived value system intrinsic to the community. It finds expression in various aspects of social life, including rituals surrounding death, systems of mutual support, labour exchange, and even traditional governance. These practices illustrate how the collective took responsibility for individuals, particularly during times of vulnerability, thereby ensuring that no one was left to face hardship alone.

**Community Practices During Bereavement**  
Practices surrounding death within the community are distinct and offer a powerful illustration of collective strength and solidarity. Among the Pnar and War communities, bereavement is not seen as a private matter confined to the immediate family but as a shared responsibility of the wider community. These practices are a true representation of the principle of 'tip kur tip kha', which emphasises respect and responsibility towards both

the maternal and paternal sides of the family.

When a death occurs, members of the community come together to share their time, labour, and emotional support with the bereaved family. Among the War Jaintia community, the tradition of visiting the bereaved family is known as 'lia beh dot'. It is considered mandatory for each household to visit the bereaved family at least once during their time of sorrow. Within the framework of traditional religion, specific family members are assigned distinct roles in the performance of last rites, reinforcing collective responsibility and order.

If death happens away from home the body of the deceased is taken to his/her residence and laid in state for one or two days. This allows families, relatives, friends, and neighbours to visit, express sympathy, and speak about the life of the departed with the bereaved family. Such practices play an important role in the healing process and help bring emotional closure. Because the body is kept in the house, even younger members of the family are introduced to death as a natural reality of life at an early age, fostering acceptance rather than fear.

Community visits do not end with cremation. They continue throughout the mourning period, which traditionally lasts for at least three months. Among the Pnar, this practice is known as 'lai nam, li nam, or lai li nam' meaning visiting the bereaved family to pay respects. Those who are unable to attend the funeral or cremation may still visit during the mourning period. During these visits, relatives and friends often extend practical assistance. Women, in particular, help with household chores, enabling the bereaved family to attend to the needs of visiting relatives and guests. Male members of the community assist in activities that reduce the physical and emotional burden on the family.

The practice of 'ja-nam', or visiting with cooked rice, is still observed, especially among followers of the traditional Niamtre religion. After the last rites, friends, neighbours, and relatives take turns bringing food, known as 'ja-nam'. While not a religious ritual in itself, 'ja-nam' forms part of the final tribute to the deceased and provides essential support to the bereaved family. Here, 'ja' refers to cooked rice, while 'nam' denotes the act of visiting to express sympathy. Each day, one or two families bring food to ensure that the bereaved household does not

go hungry throughout the mourning period.

Traditionally, a plate of 'ja-nam' consists of red rice, one egg, and a few pieces of pork cooked with sesame seeds, a Pnar delicacy known as 'doh seif' or 'doh chet nai-jong'. This simple but meaningful act reinforces the idea that sustenance, like sorrow, is to be shared.

Other important Niamtre practices include 'li booh and li choo khon', which literally mean "to drop" and "to bring back." These rituals take place after the death of the father and one day after cremation. Traditionally, the body of the deceased father is taken to the 'lung blai or kmai tung', the clan's ancestral house, where it remains until cremation. The day after cremation, the family cleans the house, washes all clothing, and performs purification baths.

Before sunset on the same day, the widowed wife and her children are ceremonially brought back to their maternal clan's house, while the paternal relatives are escorted back to their ancestral home. In both households, small meetings are held where families reaffirm their commitment to maintain and strengthen relationships between 'ki kha ki-man', the paternal relatives, and the children. Even in death, the principle of 'tip kur tip kha' is upheld, reinforcing continuity, kinship, and collective responsibility.

**Community Support Systems**

Community support also extends to other significant life events. In the southern parts of the district, the War Jaintia people practice a tradition known as 'ka chep', the donation of money or goods. 'Chep' is offered during times of sorrow as well as on joyous occasions such as weddings and ceremonies. When attending a funeral or cremation in a War village, it is customary to offer 'chep' to the bereaved family. Even those unable to attend can send their contribution through relatives, friends, or neighbours. During weddings, families receiving chep are expected to reciprocate by sending food prepared for the feast.

Another important support system is 'jakhonboo', similar to ja nam, where food is offered to a mother who has recently given birth. This practice ensures that the mother is properly nourished during a period when she is unable to work. The food typically includes 'jakho or kho soo', red rice, eggs, and pieces of 'doh seif'. This tradition, still practiced among Niamtre followers, reflects the community's care for both mother and child.

sustainability. Meghalaya will emerge as a leader in the green economy by leveraging renewable energy, climate finance, carbon credit mechanisms, and sustainable forestry practices. Where mining activities are undertaken, they will adhere strictly to global environmental, social, and governance standards. The knowledge and remote-services economy will expand through improved digital infrastructure, startup incubation, and innovation ecosystems centered in Shillong and district headquarters. Export-oriented growth will be promoted in organic food products, eco-tourism services, and skilled human resources, particularly in healthcare and education.

By the end of the ten-year period, Meghalaya is expected to generate 4-5 lakh sustainable jobs, significantly raise per-capita income, and reduce youth migration. Tourism revenues are projected to grow three to four times, while farmer incomes are expected to double. Most importantly, the state will be recognized as a national model for green, inclusive, and people-first economic development.

Yours etc.,  
Danny K. Rajee  
Shillong

## Religion and Nation Building

Editor,  
We must know one thing, and I bet that a very small group of people are aware that society is full of blind believers. These blind believers con-

## Community Exchange of Labour

Community sharing of labour, known as 'chunong', has been central to agricultural life. Rice cultivation, a major livelihood activity, requires assistance at various stages such as ploughing, sowing, and harvesting. Under 'chunong', each household contributes at least one member to assist neighbours or friends. No wages are paid; instead, the farm owner provides food for the day. Among the War people, this practice was known as 'jah kurui lok'. Over time, 'chunong' has also been extended to house construction and other communal tasks, though it is unfortunately becoming a dying tradition.

Weddings, too, remain community affairs in many villages. Every member of society has a role, from constructing the pandal to cooking and serving food. These events exemplify collective responsibility and shared celebration.

Another labour-sharing tradition, 'longhai', associated with weeding in jhum cultivation, is still practised in a few War villages. During longhai, farmers sing 'phawer', witty and wise verses sung in chorus throughout the day. There are designated left and right singers who lead the songs. Participants bring their own food, and the host ensures an ample supply of rice beer. Sadly, this tradition, like many others, is slowly fading.

## Traditional Offices as an Extension of the Common Good

Traditional grassroots institutions such as the 'Dorbar Shnong' and the office of the 'Rangbah Shnong' or 'Wahch Chnong' are also rooted in the pursuit of the common good. These offices were traditionally voluntary and pro bono in nature. The role of a headman was seen as a service to the community rather than a source of monetary benefit. The ultimate goal was to leave behind a legacy of service and integrity.

Unfortunately, in contemporary times, the original spirit of these institutions has weakened. While they remain voluntary by tradition, the pursuit of monetary gain and political favour has increasingly overshadowed their original purpose. This shift reflects a broader erosion of the collective worldview that once defined community life.

The gradual decline of these practices signals not merely the end of cultural change but the weakening of a worldview that prioritised collective well-being. Reviving and revaluating these traditions may be essential if the community is to reclaim the ethical foundations that once sustained it.

consider themselves the "guardians of religion." They should be enlightened with the fact that there is a huge difference between Religion and Faith. People must know religion does give form to faith, but it is not its origin. They should protect their faith rather than religion because the former never expires, the latter does. Religion only gets corrupted, and still lives on.

Blind believers are like cancer cells who tear the nation from within. They prefer blindness over serving the nation and building it. When the majority populace of a nation consists of these people, the nation lags behind. Another source of communal tension is these blind believers who unquestioningly follow their religious scriptures.

There is no problem in believing or following the scriptures. But these ignorant masses are so drowned in their practice that they do not let other religions co-exist in harmony. And communal disharmony is like an injured enemy pulling the nation's leg from the ground. Therefore, to build a nation, we must open up their blindness and for that, it is extremely necessary to enlighten them through education—they need more social, political, and cultural education than formal education.

Yours etc.,  
Sudarshan Dasgupta  
Shillong-4

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

# A trade deal that diminishes India

By Jagdish Rattanani

Whichever way you spin this, it should be clear that the nation has bowed to the dictates of the United States in return for a trade agreement that eases punitive tariffs on India but also barters away the nation's long term interests and compromises the much-vaunted strategic autonomy that has been the centrepiece of the Indian policy framework for a long time. It is true that not every detail of what was called the "interim agreement regarding reciprocal and mutually beneficial trade" between the two nations is known. But what is known, including the circumstances surrounding the deal, the manner of its announcement, the language of the joint statement and the connected White House executive order, indicate that India has shifted some long-held positions and to that extent this is not a deal between two equals.

The US high handedness stretched to simple courtesies like the timing of the release of the agreed statement. Trump announced the broad agreement on his social media platform 'Truth Social' on Feb. 2, days ahead of the official release by both nations, on Feb. 6/7. The Indian government announcement of the joint statement

as a part of the deal. But consider that the 'no-GM' imports claim holds by a thin thread — for example, dried distillers' grains, or DDGs for animal feed, which feature in the first bullet of the trade agreement as announced, come mostly from GM crop.

DDGs, a by-product of ethanol production from corn, add nutritional value in animal feed but can it be claimed that the GM "quality" is erased after the heavy processing that the corn goes through as ethanol is extracted? There is no consensus that the transgenic nature is eliminated in the processing. DDGs are used in feeding cattle, dairy cows, swine, and some poultry, which opens a route for a GM-linked product to enter the dairy chain. Further, if this is not a red line for India, having given in now, then how long can India hold out on other points, say dairy on which the US has been pushing much like it has on DDGs? Do note that India's position against milk imports (which is not part of this deal) is seen by the US as a Foreign Trade Barrier. In the Indian view, dairy must only be from animals that are not given blood meals or feeds containing internal

*"A tighter embrace with the United States on onerous terms, particularly but not limited to the food and the agri sector, carries the risk of a longer-term ecosystem change that may well be irreversible and forces India on a path that will make many in the country very uncomfortable. The RSS and its groups will also not be comfortable with what has transpired as can be seen from the statement of the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh, a RSS affiliate, that there should be no route open for genetically modified (GM) related products to enter the country."*

on PIB is timestamped Feb. 7, 4:20 AM IST, an unconventional hour that presented as a US-led announcement working to US time zones. If Nehru told us famously that "when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom", the we may say that the deal marks a literal and metaphorical reversal of that dawn of independence and idealism, because as India slept, the US closed a deal that snatches away India's right to decide its goals, its preferences, its trade partners and to that extent its independence.

Yet, the optics, the timings or the self-styled "weave" of the US administration, devoid as Trump and team are of diplomatic niceties, mark only the surface irritants of a deeper loss that India will have to come to terms with over time. A tighter embrace with the United States on onerous terms, particularly but not limited to the food and the agri sector, carries the risk of a longer-term ecosystem change that may well be irreversible and forces India on a path that will make many in the country very uncomfortable. The RSS and its groups will also not be comfortable with what has transpired as can be seen from the statement of the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh, a RSS affiliate, that there should be no route open for genetically modified (GM) related products to enter the country. The Trumpian style of forced deal making and the US's ways of the Wild West may pass with time, but the implications of this trade deal will continue to exact a price on India long after. Compromises for the short term inevitably bring disaster for the long term.

As farmer groups raise voices of protest against the opening of the agri sector to US imports, the nation has been assured that the interests of India's farmers, the MSME sector, dairy or handlooms and handicrafts will remain protected under the new trade deal, and that no GM crops will enter India

organs or tissue of ruminant or porcine, but the US holds that this view lacks a "discernible animal health or human health justification". The pressure on dairy from the US will not go away but will likely increase over time, now that India has opened a window. In this light, the statement in the trade agreement that "India also agrees to address long-standing non-tariff barriers to the trade in U.S. food and agricultural products" indicates the nature of the trap that India has walked into.

Equally problematic is the statement that within six months India must determine "with a view towards a positive outcome ... whether U.S.-developed or international standards, including testing requirements, are acceptable for the purposes of U.S. exports entering the Indian market in identified sectors." The executive order issued by Trump lowering tariffs on India ("Modifying duties to address threats to the United States by the government of the Russian Federation") also puts in place a committee that "shall monitor whether India resumes directly or indirectly importing Russian Federation oil", with the threat of punitive duties coming back if it is determined that India has not stopped or has resumed buying Russian oil.

None of this should keep India comfortable. The government has of course gone on the aggressive in defending the deal, but it is unlikely that the nation will accept these terms in toto. It would be appropriate for the government not to oversell the deal, as the commerce minister Piyush Goyal tried at his press conference. Prudence would be to leave room for some backtracking in the light of evolving public opinion.

(The writer is a journalist and faculty member at SPJIMR. Views are personal) (Through The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

## Letters to the Editor

### Can those who died inside the killer mines ever see justice?

Editor,  
The recent explosion in an illegal coal mine at Thangsko in East Jaintia Hills, in which 27 people lost their lives, has deeply shaken many of us. Painful as it is, this tragedy cannot be called unexpected. We have seen it happen before. We have read about it again and again.

For years, The Shillong Times, along with other newspapers, have repeatedly reported deaths and accidents linked to illegal coal mining in the Jaintia Hills. Readers will remember the detailed coverage of the flooding of rat-hole mines in December 2018, where miners were trapped and drowned. In the years that followed came reports of deaths due to suffocation and mine collapse, bodies recovered from abandoned pits, and repeated accidents connected to illegal mining and coal transportation. Even after the ban, fresh mishaps continued to be reported year after year, making it painfully clear that illegal mining had never truly stopped.

Sadly, the same pattern follows every such tragedy. Rescue teams rush in and work under extremely difficult conditions. Political leaders visit the site and express shock. Compensation is announced. Inquiries are ordered and promises of strict action are made. For a short while, there is public concern

and media attention. Then, slowly, the focus shifts elsewhere. With time, enforcement weakens, and the same dangerous activity quietly resumes.

This latest incident forces us to ask some pointed questions. If illegal coal mining has been banned for years, how were several mine shafts operating simultaneously? How were explosives procured and used? Why were poor labourers—many of them migrants—allowed to work in such hazardous conditions? And why does firm action so often come only after lives have already been lost?

This is not just about laws being broken. It exposes a deeper failure on our part as a society. Poverty and lack of alternatives push workers into these mines, but weak monitoring, selective enforcement, and the protection of vested interests allow this deadly practice to continue. Occasional arrests or temporary crackdowns do little to address the root of the problem.

Here the question that must be asked is: how long will this continue? How many more lives must be lost before illegal coal mining is tackled once and for all? How many more editorials and warnings must appear before steps are taken to actually prevent the next tragedy?

The victims deserve more than sympathy and compensation. They deserve justice in its truest sense—justice that protects the living and so that no more lives are lost this way.

Yours etc.,  
A concerned citizen  
Name withheld on request

### 10-Year Economic Roadmap for Meghalaya

Editor,  
Meghalaya possesses a unique combination of natural wealth, human capital, and cultural strength that positions it well for sustainable economic growth in the coming decade. With careful planning, inclusive governance, and a focus on people-centric development, the state can transform itself into an economically strong and environmentally responsible region. This 10-year economic roadmap presents a phased strategy aimed at strengthening foundations, scaling growth, and achieving long-term sustainability.

The first phase, spanning Years 1 to 3, focuses on building strong foundations and restoring public and investor confidence. Governance reforms will be a priority, including the introduction of single-window clearance systems, time-bound approvals, and transparent regulatory frameworks. Clear land-use and environmental policies will enable responsible investments while safeguarding ecological balance. Infrastructure development during this phase will emphasise all-weather road connectivity, reliable electricity, digital infrastructure, and improved urban services. Shillong will be developed as a green and

walkable capital city with better public transport and civic amenities. Human capital development will be central, with district-level skill hubs offering training in tourism, healthcare, construction, green jobs, and digital services. These initiatives will improve youth employability and align skills with market needs.

The second phase, covering Years 4 to 6, aims to convert preparedness into large-scale economic activity, employment generation, and income growth. Tourism will be developed as a key economic engine through eco-tourism circuits, homestay promotion, adventure tourism, and wellness destinations. Community participation and local entrepreneurship will ensure inclusive growth. Agriculture will transition from subsistence-based practices to value-added agri-business models. Food processing clusters, cold storage facilities, and logistics networks will support high-value crops such as ginger, turmeric, spices, and horticultural produce. Organic certification and GI branding will open access to national and international markets. During this phase, Meghalaya will also be positioned as a regional hub for education and healthcare, with investments in nursing, paramedical, OET training, and allied health sciences. MSMEs in bamboo, handloom, handicrafts, and wood-based industries will be supported through access to credit, design innovation, and marketing assistance.

The third phase, spanning Years 7 to 10, focuses on leadership, innovation, and

"Doubt kills more dreams than failure ever will."

— Suzy Kassem

## The Shillong Times

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### Tower of silence

THE Budget Session this time has been extraordinarily stormy. On the one side, the Opposition sought to target Prime Minister Narendra Modi, citing two principal issues related to documents that were brought to light in recent days – one being army chief NM Naravane's memoirs; and the other in the form of exposes from a controversial and high-flying American criminal and financier, the late Jeffrey Epstein. On the other hand, Lok Sabha speaker Om Birla has earned the opposition wrath over his alleged attempts to shield the prime minister from an opposition onslaught over the two issues. Clearly, both PM Modi and Speaker Birla have done enough to provoke the opposition, which led to the submission of a no-confidence motion against the Speaker by nearly 120 MPs. While these MPs are mostly from the Congress, Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi has avoided being a signatory, saying such an action on his part against the chair would undermine the spirit of democracy.

The 'released' comments of Naravane against the prime minister included his observation that the Modi government was found wanting in adequately organising the defence of the nation during the Chinese PLA offensive in Galwan Valley in 2020. The death of at least 20 Indian soldiers in action there added to the pathos. That the PM chose to avoid a reply in Parliament and that he even avoided facing the house are serious matters. It, however, is natural for the treasury benches to defend the PM; and it's understandable that defence minister Rajnath Singh sought to thwart a discussion, as he too has been accused by Naravane of an effective abdication of responsibility at the critical hour of national security. The Epstein files, released in the US after a legal tussle, runs into millions of pages of documents as also visuals, putting the high and mighty across nations in a poor light; and this included Modi too, whose name has been repeatedly mentioned in different contexts. That President Trump has also been put in a similar plight is another matter.

Among the reports that attracted wide publicity is that Epstein ran a high-end prostitution racket supplying women and possibly underage girls too to those in high positions and visiting dignitaries. Here, the nation had been alerted in advance by former Union minister and seasoned parliamentarian Subramanian Swamy that the Epstein files were coming and this could put the prime minister on the defensive. Modi, in response, chose to erect a tower of silence. At the same time, there are those who dismiss such indulgences by world leaders as private, personal and inconsequential. A problem, however, is the difference between ground realities and public perceptions of morality. Too much need not be read into such 'exposes' as long as national interests have not been compromised. At the same time, Modi is duty-bound to explain to the nation whether or not the army chief spoke the truth. Such observations from a top defence authority have stunned the nation. They cast aspersions on the competence of Modi and Rajnath Singh to occupy their exalted chairs. Silence cannot be a responsible response. More so in a democracy.

### Letters to the Editor

### Silence Is Not Neutral

Editor,  
With reference to the report "Blood Coal": Mining syndicate thrives in Elaka Sutnga amid political protection" published in The Shillong Times dated 9 February, the silence of pressure cannot be explained away as oversight, fear, or lack of access. Silence, in this context, is participation.

For more than a decade, illegal coal mining and transportation have operated openly across East Jaintia Hills. Coal-laden trucks move routinely on public highways, pass through check points, and ply at fixed hours often in convoys. It stretches belief to suggest that organisations which otherwise claim to be vigilant guardians of indigenous rights, employment, and land could have missed such sustained, large-scale activity. Illegal coal transport on this scale does not happen invisibly.

The more plausible explanation is complicity. If pressure groups were truly unaware, then their selective vigilance patrolling highways for migrants while ignoring coal trucks amounts to deliberate blindness. If they were aware, and still chose silence, then they stand morally and politi-

cally compromised. Either way, they cannot claim innocence.

More troubling are accounts that point to active facilitation. During a discussion witnessed by this writer, a member of an NGO produced a written list of truck registration numbers allegedly "cleared" to transport coal. The existence of such lists if indeed used to regulate who may and may not ply coal-laden vehicles reveals an organised system of unofficial permission, not random evasion. Illegal transport, sustained over years, requires predictable passage, coordination, and protection. That protection does not come from the jungle alone.

Pressure groups cannot credibly argue that they lack access to mining areas when their influence is clearly sufficient to regulate movement on highways. Nor can they claim concern for indigenous livelihoods while remaining mute as unregulated, dangerous mining kills labourers and devastates land often for the benefit of a small local elite.

Silence, therefore, is not neutrality. It is alignment. If these organisations wish to reclaim moral authority, they must first answer uncomfortable questions: Who controls the movement of coal trucks? Who decides which vehicles pass and which do not? And why has no

One may take this article as an observer's comments as to what is really happening in Khasi society today or simply as a rejoinder to Ellerine Diengdoh's excellent OpEd titled "Why my knee-bone is a threat to National Security" (ST February 6th 2026). I would like to start from her closing remark, "I have to ask, are you sure the hen hasn't already crowed?" Yes, indeed has the Khasi hen (meaning its women folk) already crowed? This is interesting simply because the often quoted, shopworn and stale Khasi adage "Ynda kynih ka iar kynthei, Pyrthei ruh ka lah wai" (When the hen starts to crow, the world would have come to an end) has been so overused that it has simply become a banal saying quoted equally by both academic scholars as well as the nearest street urchin.

Lets then first start with the latter part of the saying, "Pyrthei ruh ka lah wai," (the world has ended). Can this be seriously taken as a literal prediction? Does it connote that the physical world we live in would literally end or disappear if the biologically impossible feat of a hen turning into a rooster were to occur? In an educated and scientifically tempered society the adage is simply an amusing turn of phrase. For an illiterate community however it can be the reason for mass public hysteria and fear. Taken metaphorically however, the aphorism is indicative of how our ancestors viewed the world they lived in. It simply means recognition of the fact that social change is a constant factor of life and that it takes place continuously with the passage of time. In the case of the Khasis it would mean that when women are at liberty, permitted or given the chance to participate in the work space conservatively reserved for men, the way of life and the social order of our tribe would also change. So now to the pertinent question "Has the Khasi hen already crowed, and if so, for how many times?" Interesting question simply itching for an answer.

The answer to the above question shall lie in two parts. Firstly, do other indigenous communities the world over have similar predictions relating to future changes that are likely to affect or change the world they live in? The second answer relates directly to the belief of the Khasi- Pnar people on the veracity of this particular maxim in question; whether it is yet to happen or has it already occurred; and if it has, then how many times before and what were the outcomes?

pressure group, local or regional, publicly condemned the blast at Thangsko or demanded accountability from those who profit from and protect illegal mining operations?

Until such questions are confronted honestly, the silence of pressure groups will continue to be read not as restraint but as evidence of their place within the very racket they claim to oppose.

Yours etc.,  
Manthemi H Dkhar,  
Via email

### Why Meghalaya's Silence Should Not Be Mistaken for Peace

Editor,  
The air in Meghalaya is thick, not with the famous mountain mist, but with a growing sense of betrayal. From the corridors of the Secretariat to the tea stalls, the conversation is the same: how much longer can the people endure a government that seems to prioritize "high-level" interests over the lives of its own citizens?

The wounds of the Mukroh massacre remain open and raw. Five lives were

lost defending our soil, yet years later, justice feels like a distant dream. Instead of standing firm, the MDA government's "Give and Take" policy with Assam has felt more like a "Giveaway." Villagers in border areas feel abandoned, watching their ancestral lands being signed away on maps by leaders who don't have to live with the consequences of an encroaching neighbour.

As the Hynniewtrep Integrated Territorial Organisation (HITO) has rightly pointed out, illegal coal mining has evolved from a secret trade into a blatant "state-enabled" industry. The recent tragedies in illegal pits, like the one at Thangsko, prove that the ban is a myth. When HITO demands a CBI probe, they aren't just making a political statement; they are echoing the cry for transparency. If the government has nothing to hide, why fear the CBI? The revenue leakage is massive, while our roads crumble and our youth remain unemployed.

Beyond the mines, our society is under siege. The drug epidemic is no longer a "problem"-it is a full-blown crisis stealing an entire generation of Meghalaya's youth. Combine this with the unresolved relocation of the Harijan Colony and the hollow promises regarding the Inner Line Permit (ILP) to check illegal immigration, and you have a recipe for

disaster. The government must realize that the youth of today are not the silent observers of yesterday. We see the "high-level" corruption, we see the lies, and we see the lack of will. Across the world, from Nepal to Bangladesh, we have seen what happens when Gen-Z reaches its breaking point. When the system fails to protect the land and the people, the people eventually take to the streets to protect themselves.

Meghalaya is at a crossroads. The MDA government must decide: will they continue to serve the rich, or will they finally start serving the people before the fire of public anger becomes impossible to douse?

Yours etc.,  
H.Umdor  
Shillong-8

nant woman has the right to choose between continuation or termination of pregnancy. Pregnancy in cases such as pregnant minor girls, pregnant disabled women, rape survivors, fetal abnormalities, miscarriage and so on requires termination. In a society, where the birth of an illegitimate child or the pregnancy of an unwed woman causes social and personal problems, abortion is the best choice. While the unethical aspect of terminating a life in womb is a matter of debate, there is little doubt about the righteousness of the cause. In some cases pregnancy poses serious threat to a woman's life and abortion in such a situation is justified. The court's ruling emphasises women's reproductive autonomy. Forcing a woman to continue an unwanted pregnancy is inhuman and it is not a sign of civilized society. A woman has the right to protect her body and her life and others have no right to pressurise her to do something against her will. Her physical and emotional well being must be given importance.

Yours etc.,  
H.Umdor  
Shillong-8

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# The Crowing Hen

By Toki Blah

As to the first question, the answer is "Yes"! Other indigenous communities too have their respective predictions on their own future and some of the more famous ones are:- (a) Cree Red Indian Prophecy: "Only when the last tree has been cut down, the last fish caught, and the last river poisoned will we realize we cannot eat money." It's already happening, especially to us an indigenous community who pride ourselves of our umbilical relationship with nature.

*"Does it connote that the physical world we live in would literally end or disappear if the biologically impossible feat of a hen turning into a rooster were to occur? In an educated and scientifically tempered society the adage is simply an amusing turn of phrase. For an illiterate community however it can be the reason for mass public hysteria and fear. Taken metaphorically however, the aphorism is indicative of how our ancestors viewed the world they lived in."*

(b) Lakota Sioux Teaching: "When the world shakes and the animals disappear, a new people will emerge to live in harmony with the Earth." Not clear but does sound ominous (c) South American Maya Indian Saying: "The end of the calendar is not the end of the world, but the end of one cycle and the beginning of another." The meaning here is akin to the Khasi Pnar prophecy on the crowing hen. (d) Ojibwe Red Indian Saying: "Someday the Earth will weep, she will beg for her life, she will cry with tears of blood. You will then make a choice to stand with

*"The introduction of modern education had profound effects on Khasi society. For those skeptics of our matrilineal system, it must be acknowledged that this unique feature of our community gave educated Khasi women the impetus to propel themselves in society as no other system could. Education reinforced women's already central role in Khasi society, where lineage and inheritance pass through the mother."*

the Earth or against her." I guess this is one of the most intimidating prophecies of them all. For as this forecast plays itself out, in all its catastrophic sequences, the tragedy mankind has brought upon himself lies nakedly exposed for everyone to see. In Meghalaya our rivers; our land; our forests cry out in agony but money and power have muffled the ears and eyes of our leaders. The scream of Nature remains unattended.

Now coming back to the Khasi belief in the crowing

school based on a Western styled education system was introduced into these hills and ever since there was no looking back for our women. The introduction of modern education had profound effects on Khasi society. For those skeptics of our matrilineal system, it must be acknowledged that this unique feature of our community gave educated Khasi women the impetus to propel themselves in society as no other system could. Education reinforced women's already central role in Khasi

society, where lineage and inheritance pass through the mother. Educated Khasi women began to participate more actively in professions such as teaching, nursing, administration, physicians and clerical work and this trend in on the increase instead of the reverse. Today they are crashing their way into the sanctum sanctorum of male dominance – the fount of governance. The Khasi hen has started to crow. The World has not ended. Instead we witness a change where an era of male dominance in governance has begun to be questioned.

I would like to end by assuring all that the crowing of the Khasi female is not an existential threat for the tribe, like we are given to believe, but of an older era yielding to a new way of life. I would like to see it as a strengthening of our democratic faith of governance BY THE PEOPLE, OF THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE. As a state, for 54 years we have been governed by men. This cannot be denied. Nor can we deny the grief, despair and depression this male dominated governance has led the people of Meghalaya into. Today we see no vision for the state. There is no Road Map to give hope to the youth. We simply drift like dead wood to God knows where. The electoral roll of the state shows that our women outnumber men. On that count by what logic of reasoning do we keep qualified; educated and capable women out of the ambit of governance be it at the Village Dorbar; Dorbar Hima; head of our political parties and in the process from being leaders of the Government? Isn't it time for the Political parties of the state to bring in better candidates in the form of women with education; dedication; spirit and commitment to serve Meghalaya, and please don't give the ridiculous answer that they are hard to come by. There is no shortage of such women. What we are really short of in supply is a male mindset willing to step out of traditional gender discrimination; of statesmen who can see beyond a stupid 5 year Assembly term; of leaders who are capable of seeing the challenging trends in the states socio-economic needs. The hen has already crowed. Perhaps it's heralding the end of another era and the dawn of a new one. Is the inevitable entry of Artificial Intelligence into our lives the start and beginning of a new era? If so, are we prepared as to what the crowing hen is trying to tell us?

# Two Lakhs for a Bucketful of Ash

By Ellerine Diengdoh

Thangsko.  
The smell hits you first. That wet ash, smell, sweet and rotting, like burnt meat. It hangs over the silence where thirty men were roasted whole. It's the darkness that takes them and we know this darkness well.

Ksan. Rymbai. Umpleng. Urak. Others too, others we don't hear of.

They are just names on a map now, blurring together, but the ending... the ending is always the same... the earth keeps them. It is an efficient system, in a depraved sort of way. You don't need to bury the dead, you just count the coal and walk away.

We are told that sealing twenty-two thousand abandoned mines is an "uphill task", and perhaps it is be-

raw, grief-torn wail of the wife, the child, the sister, the withered grandmother. But to the cold eyes watching from high windows, these are not families. These are nameless subterranean vermin, interchangeable refuse, mere burrowers in the dirt who simply forgot to come back up.

In response, the nation steps over the bodies and drops a coin. "Here, take two lakh rupees." That is sufficient to wipe the black tears... tears of coal dust and salt... off a face. That is enough to ward off the hunger for the rest of their days.

It is pathetic!  
There is something almost farcical about the state's sudden awakening, announcing



cause the holes aren't just in the ground... they are in our conscience, and those are much harder to fill.

I have been trying to visualise this number. Twenty-two thousand.

That is not a landscape; that is a colander. Twenty-two thousand death traps!

A sponge made of rocks that has been drinking the blood of the poor for a hundred years. It suggests that for many grim decades, while the people slept and the rains fell, the ground was being stolen from underneath our feet, bucket by bucket, until we stood on nothing but a thin crust over a watery hell.

"Rat-Hole Mining", a name that strips a man of

a manhunt as if this were a mystery. They claim to be hunting invisible men, but these financiers aren't hiding in the crevices where men go to suffocate. They are invisible only because they are overexposed... hidden in the blinding glare of absolute power. Their manicured hands are scrubbed clean of the black dust that now calcifies the lungs of the dead. The High Court screams like a preacher in an empty church, but the barons do not hear. They live in their palaces of air, too high for the laws of men to reach them.

It makes me look away with shame. We call this a "Christian State," don't we? I have been reading the

*"It is a tunnel no wider than a coffin, the air thick with sulphur and the rot of damp earth. The men who crawl inside are not brave; they are starving. They are possessed by a hunger that overrides instinct, they drag themselves on their bellies, inch by agonising inch, into the mountain's throat. They squeeze into fissures so tight, the rock shreds their skin, while the darkness presses against their eyes with the weight of a premature burial."*

his worth before he even enters the earth. I have tried to imagine the wretchedness of the rat-hole. It is a tunnel no wider than a coffin, the air thick with sulphur and the rot of damp earth. The men who crawl inside are not brave; they are starving. They are possessed by a hunger that overrides instinct, they drag themselves on their bellies, inch by agonising inch, into the mountain's throat. They squeeze into fissures so tight, the rock shreds their skin, while the darkness presses against their eyes with the weight of a premature burial.

When death comes, it is swift. It is a hammer blow of air itself catching fire, a sudden, searing vacuum that tears the breath from your lungs and slams you against the tunnel. It is the terrifying, instant panic of smoke blindness. It is the smell of singeing hair, the stench of roasted flesh... your flesh... cooked in a space no wider than your shoulders, and the frantic, choking, clawing realisation that the coffin has become a kiln.

While they burned below, I stood above, outside the storm of grief, like an intruder... drinking in the

Bible to understand how this works. From what I can gather, the central character, Jesus, was quite specific about looking after the poor. He didn't seem to have any parables about burying them under tons of debris.

The only true heresy you commit in this pious state of ours, is the vulgarity of getting caught. As long as the bodies remain pressed into the silence of the mud, the faithful will not blink. When the dead refuse to stay hidden, when they clutter the surface with their inconvenient rotting bodies, then everyone will scramble to put on their mask of hal-lowed rage. Let us not be fooled by the noise of the minister's rehearsed and hollow resonance at the podium. The manhunt will fade, the sirens will die out, and the rains will wash away the blood from the headlines. The holes will remain open, like gaping, insatiable orifices waiting to be fed, and desperate men will crawl back into the dark, dark belly of the earth.

In our land of God and sun-kissed clouds, the only thing that trickles down is the water, and the only thing that rises is the coal.

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/ authors and not that of The Shillong Times

*"Success is the sum of small efforts - repeated day in and day out."*

—Robert Collier

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 181 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2026

### Rivers in Distress

THOSE who live in Meghalaya and observe the lack of concern for its critical natural resources would know that the Economic Survey 2025-26, tabled in Parliament in January 2026, has highlighted that the state faces a critical water crisis. The survey notes that nearly half of the state's natural springs have either dried up or are experiencing a significant reduction in water discharge. Once acclaimed as one of the wettest places on earth, Meghalaya now stares at a new dilemma—that of being a water-deficit region due to climate change and anthropogenic factors. The reasons are also known to all - extractive mining and quarrying and the timber trade that continues unabated. Trees that have hardly had time to mature are mercilessly cut down, including from reserved forests. The question not asked is—why is the top heavy State Forest Department looking the other way and allowing this daylight plunder.

Since forests are known as water reservoirs, if trees are mercilessly massacred either for firewood, for commercial use or for charcoal production, then it follows that water sources would inevitably dry up. Interestingly this is a state that has so many layers of governance but each one outdoes the other in terms of selling out the environment. No sustainability study has been conducted to find out how much the unabated quarrying and the flattening of hills has accelerated the pace of climate change. And even there is such a study, neither the State Government nor the local traditional governance structures actually care about the environment. The latest study on rivers and how polluted each of them are just compounds the problems. That Meghalaya is a state where no law prevails is evident from the fact that houses are allowed to be built right on the river. Each of these houses release their kitchen waste water and sewage directly into the river. Nongmynsong is one place through which the River Umkialiar passes and where a church is allowed to be built on the river. Why is it that there are no checks and balances in this state?

Interestingly the State Government is good at white-washing such findings by coming out with all kinds of schemes ostensibly to deal with the crises but other than the fancy acronyms for such schemes not much results are seen on the ground. The so-called community-centric climate adaptation strategy to secure water resources states that it would restore 8,430 hectares of forest and treat major catchments like the Umiew and Ganol rivers. Already Meghalaya had lost up to 8 sq km of forests in 2023. How does the restoration of forests keep pace with the destruction? The Government also claims that over 55,000 springs have been mapped using GIS technology to allow for timely interventions and that more than 500 community-based, climate-adaptive water harvesting projects are being implemented. Yet trees are being cut for flimsy reasons at Mawlai Mawroh and other places within Shillong city which are right under the nose of the Forest Department. The problem with Meghalaya is the huge gap between intent and action on the ground. That there are multiple institutions each with their own vested interests also work against public interest in a state where a few at the helm of affairs take decisions on behalf of the "community" a term that is today reduced to an idiom with no real meaning.

# Growth Without Welfare? Rethinking Meghalaya's GDP Story

By Bhogtaram Mawroh

In less than a week, the Government of Meghalaya is going to present its Budget for the year 2026-2027. Just like last year, there is sure to be a long speech by the Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma, outlining the various achievements of the government over the past year. One of the achievements that will form part of his opening speech is the claim that Meghalaya has emerged as the second fastest-growing state in the country after Tamil Nadu, with a Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) growth of 9.66 per cent at constant prices in 2025. For comparison, it is important to note that Tamil Nadu is the second-largest economy in the country and is among the top five states with the highest per capita income. However, despite the impressive growth that Meghalaya has witnessed, it will still remain among the poorest states in the country, at least for the time being.

It is in this context that growth rates and long-term trends become very important. The announcement that the state has become the second fastest-growing economy was made by Governor C. H. Vijayashankar during his Republic Day address. During his speech, he also announced that the state is on track to triple the size of its economy by 2032. It is this second statement that holds greater significance. In his 2025-2026 Budget Speech, in the very first paragraph on state finances (Section 2), Conrad Sangma mentioned that when his government took power in 2023, the state's GDP was Rs 42,697 crore. This, he stated, was to be increased to Rs 85,000 crore by 2028 in order to make Meghalaya a 10 dollars billion economy.

In order to achieve the target of a 10 billion dollars economy—and now the goal of tripling the economy—the state's economy would need to grow annually by about 15 per cent. But, looking at the growth rates over the last three years, these have been around 10-11 per cent, a difference of about four percentage points. However, the 15 per cent growth rate refers to nominal growth (at current prices), which has to be adjusted for inflation, estimated at around 5-6 per cent over the last few years. When

adjusted, the real growth rate (at constant prices) comes to around 9-10 per cent, which the state has indeed achieved in recent years. Therefore, if this trend continues, it is likely that the government will achieve its target, provided the exchange rate does not continue to worsen. Even if it does, the target would only be delayed by a few months, which should not pose a serious problem. At this pace, per capita income should also exceed ₹2-lakh per year, bringing the state closer to the top earners in the country. The growth rate is thus a significant achievement for the government and deserves recognition. However, there is a curious aspect of the way GDP is calculated that makes the discussion more interesting.

Let us assume that in 2024 I built a house that cost around Rs 5 lakh, inclusive of labour and materials. For some reason, in 2025 I dismantled the house, which required additional expenses of around Rs 1 lakh. I then rebuilt the house on the same site for about Rs 10 lakh. In total, I incurred a loss of around Rs 11 lakh in the process. The curious thing is that during the same period, the GDP of my region would have grown by 120 per cent—more than double. This example is critical because it reflects a common complaint heard from citizens regarding the state of infrastructure in the state. A road is built by the PWD, and after a few weeks the PHED digs it up to lay pipes. The road is repaired, and the cycle continues. Even if the same road is dug up and remade repeatedly, GDP will at least remain the same, if not grow. In reality, however, there has been no actual improvement in people's lives. Meanwhile, contractors close to politicians continue to receive the same contracts year after year, and their bank balances keep swelling.

It must be acknowledged that many new roads are being built in the state. They look good and appear likely to last for a few years. However, some will require repairs very soon. The VIP road from Mawtawar to Umryniah has one of the toughest climbs for cyclists, especially when the road was under repair. After it was repaired, the climb eased somewhat, but it remains

formidable. Looking at the road, however, I suspect that potholes will appear very soon once the monsoon season arrives. The surface layer is quite thin, and with increasing traffic on the route, it will not be long before repairs are needed again. When that happens, the state's GDP will once more increase by a few percentage points, and this will again be projected as an achievement.

Many of these roads are being built using loans from multilateral agencies. Recently, Santa Mary Shylla, the MLA of the Sutnga-Saipung constituency, announced that ₹260 crore has been sanctioned for road improvement, with work scheduled to commence by March this year. If the road is completed by the end of the 2025-2026 financial year, it will roughly add ₹260 crore to the state's GDP for that year. While the project will certainly improve connectivity in the constituency, if the contract is awarded to those close to the government, it could greatly enrich a few vested interests as well. What worries some is that the funding is being provided by the World Bank, making it yet another externally aided project and raising concerns about a potential debt trap for the state in the long run.

Another issue related to GDP is that even though it may grow every year and the state may become richer in aggregate terms, this does not necessarily mean that people are becoming better off. Coal mining provides a good example. During its heyday, when the industry was in full swing, mining and quarrying accounted for around 7-8 per cent of the state's GDP, with coal being a major component. Although coal mining takes place in several parts of the state, East Jaintia Hills has become synonymous with the industry, with the wealth generated from it laying the foundation for the political careers of many. Yet the district has the third-highest proportion of people suffering from multidimensional poverty in the state. In terms of performance against the 15 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators, the district again ranks near the bottom. Thus, while coal mining contributed to the

overall GDP of the state, it did little to alleviate poverty. This is why even per capita income, which is a slightly better indicator than GDP, often fails to capture actual welfare. But the problem does not end there—there is an even more sinister side to GDP calculations.

Coal mining has also been blamed for numerous deaths, many of them among members of the migrant community, though there have also been local victims. More insidious and long-term problems arise in the form of environmental degradation and threats to human health. Water pollution is the most obvious issue and has been well documented, with water bodies turning blue and fish dying in large numbers. This forces local communities either to consume contaminated water or to purchase water for domestic use. Increased sales of bottled water contribute to GDP. When people fall sick and visit doctors or buy medicines that too add to GDP. The longer they remain ill, the more they contribute to GDP. If someone dies due to illness, the expenses incurred on funerals further add to GDP. Thus, growth in GDP is not always a reliable indicator of whether citizens are actually better off.

This discussion is not meant to be cynical about the government's claim that the state is the second fastest-growing economy in the country. It is indeed a significant achievement and deserves celebration, especially since growth is necessary to lift people out of poverty. The question, however, is whether the goal of improving people's well-being can be assessed solely through GDP figures. The answer is clearly no. Therefore, it is hoped that during the budget debate, the government will be questioned about the creation of decent jobs, social security, education, health, and the environment. What will matter here are not just financial allocations, but concrete results on the ground. It is also hoped that the opposition will come prepared with its own analysis so that we can better understand how the state and its people are truly faring. Only then can we have a productive budget session.

*(The views expressed in the article are those of the author and do not reflect in any way his affiliation to any organisation or institution).*

## Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Why We Rarely Question Authority...! It is no wonder that politicians and priests get away with almost anything in our country.

Frankly, they deserve an award for consistency. Not for honesty or competence, but for surviving decade after decade without being questioned. This is no small achievement. It requires co-operation from the public, and we have delivered splendidly. We have spent generations training authority figures by practising obedience with Olympic-level discipline.

Nod on cue. Clap on command.

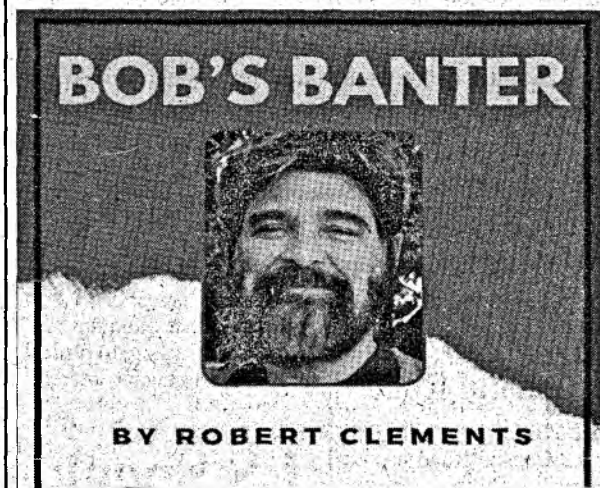
Stand up when told. Sit down when ordered. Never ask why. If questioning were a crime, we would be the most law-abiding nation on earth, with jails standing empty and conscience completely incarcerated.

The training begins early, usually at home, somewhere between the age when a child first asks "why" and the age when that same child learns it is safer not to. In the Indian household, respect for elders is treated like a divine commandment, handed down along with the pressure

rising is safe. From a young age, we are trained to reproduce answers like photocopy machines. Asking why is treated as a distraction. By-hearing is celebrated. Curiosity is frowned upon. A child who memorises the textbook is called brilliant. A child who asks questions is labelled troublesome. Governments love this system. A thinking citizen is inconvenient. A memorising citizen is manageable.

Examinations reward recall, not reasoning. Teachers rush through lessons, students rush through notes, and everyone rushes towards marks. Lower the pass marks, shorten the syllabus, and suddenly success rates improve dramatically. Everyone passes, except logic. Years later, these same students grow up to vote, cheer, forward messages on social media, and defend authority with alarming enthusiasm, while having no idea why they believe what they believe.

The results are visible everywhere. A generation of well-meaning uncles and aunts, fathers and mothers, who confuse obedience with patriotism and silence with stability.



cooker and the advice not to waste food.

You may question the electricity bill, the neighbour's dog, or even the existence of ghosts, but never an elder. The moment a child asks an innocent question, someone gasps dramatically and says, "How can you talk like that?" It is never explained what exactly is wrong with the question. The crime lies not in the content, but in the act itself.

Somewhere between childhood and adulthood, respect quietly turns into silence.

Silence, it must be said, is extremely useful. It allows elders to get away with everything, including behaviour that would land others in serious trouble. The child is told to keep quiet. The teenager is warned not to argue. The adult masters the fine art of looking the other way. When this silence matures, politicians step in and give it a respectable name. "This is our Indian culture," they declare, smiling benignly, while doing exactly as they please.

This culture of obedience does not stop at the dining table. It obediently follows us into the temple, the church, and the mosque. Here, authority is upgraded from respected to sacred. Priests are placed on pedestals so high that even asking for an explanation requires oxygen support.

To question a religious leader feels sinful, dangerous, and vaguely responsible for everything that goes wrong afterwards. Ask a priest one uncomfortable question and suddenly your phone falls, your tyre punctures, your child catches a cold, and your promotion letter mysteriously gets delayed.

Superstition does the rest of the work.

People genuinely believe that asking a question invites divine displeasure. God, apparently, is very sensitive and deeply offended by curiosity. He prefers unquestioning silence, preferably accompanied by donations.

The result is predictable. When nobody questions, corruption thrives. Today we have religious leaders who enjoy unquestioned authority and unquestioned wealth, a combination that would make even the most ambitious politician slightly jealous.

The second reason we rarely question authority is our education system, which operates on a simple philosophy: thinking is risky, memo-

They genuinely believe that questioning the government is anti-national, questioning religious leaders is anti-faith, and questioning elders is anti-family. They did not choose authoritarianism. They politely nodded their way into it. Each nod seemed harmless at the time. Collectively, they became a national habit.

Authority, of course, loves this arrangement. When nobody asks questions, there is no need for answers. Speeches can be vague, promises can be recycled, failures can be blamed on someone else, and success can be claimed loudly. Television debates turn into shouting matches, not because people are questioning authority, but because they are defending it. The loudest voices are rarely the most thoughtful. They are simply the most obedient.

And yet, how stubbornly refuses to die. It lives in the younger generation, those irritating creatures who ask too many questions, read the fine print, and refuse to be impressed by titles alone. They want to know why a policy exists, who benefits from it, and who pays the price. They are unimpressed by slogans and suspicious of anyone who demands respect before earning it. Naturally, they are told they lack values, culture, and discipline. This is usually said by people who confuse submission with virtue.

So here is a humble request to the young.

Please continue to ask irritating questions. Please read the fine print, because our short-sightedness prevents us from doing so. Please refuse to clap on command when something feels wrong. Please remember that respect and silence are not the same thing.

One can respect a person and still question their decisions. In fact, real respect demands it.

If you succeed in separating respect from silence, authority in this country may finally learn to fear the most dangerous thing of all. Not protests. Not slogans. Not anger. But a simple, calm, persistent question.

Why? (You can request for Bob's Banter by Robert Clements as a daily column on your whatsapp by sending him your name and phone number on bobbanter@gmail.com)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Same Script and Blatant Lies

Editor,

Here we are living by the same script yet again - illegal mining claiming more lives of voiceless, poor labourers in illegal mines owned by the "High Level" and the "High Level" controlled government mouthing the same old blatant lies to defend its failures.

Of the many blatant lies the government uses in trying to pull the wool over our eyes is the explanation that "the mining was taking place in remote areas, 3-4 hours walk away from the nearest villages," which make it hard for authorities to detect any illegalities. That may or may not be true but basic common sense tells us that illegal coal wherever it may be extracted needs markets and to reach such markets needs to be transported by trucks and pass through state roads and national highways where there are several check-gates manned by the police and other authorities. Hence, if the police and other relevant authorities do their duties supply could be choked and stopped at these points and without markets, illegal mining would stop automatically. It may also be added that there is no need to use high-tech means like drones or satellites to detect illegal coal mining. Conventional methods if carried out with honesty would

be enough. Having said this, as the trust level on all state authorities including the police has vanished, there is a need for central government intervention including the deployment of central police forces to man all the roads leading to coal markets as had similarly happened in Karnataka several years ago where illegal iron ore mining was stopped after the central government intervened.

Another blatant lie of the government and spokesmen of the "High Level" is that coal mining, illegal or otherwise supports the livelihoods of thousands of locals. However, what we see is that whenever coal mining tragedies occur, those who lose their lives or get injured are always the non-local labourers which indicate that there are few, if any locals who are engaged in the dangerous rat hole mining. Besides labourers, we also know that coal mine supervisors and business managers are mostly non-locals. So which locals benefit from coal mining? The answer is common public knowledge - the High level coal mine owners who finance their opulent lifestyles at the expense of human life and the environment which is being demolished day by day.

If one sees straight, one realizes that coal mining has been responsible for the loss of innumerable livelihoods. Acid laden rivers poison-

ing agricultural land and fish sanctuaries downstream thereby snatching the age-old livelihoods of thousands of farmers and fishermen throwing them into poverty. But these people are voiceless and so few people know about their struggles.

The forthcoming session of the Assembly is at hand and as always, this session too will be another circus. It is certain that the issue of illegal coal mining will become a "hot" issue. Opposition members will shout and make many accusations against the government but again as always they will fail to put the government on the mat. The ruling members especially those who are well known to be eloquent will wriggle the government out with their marathon sweet talks and distractions, in the process exhaust the extremely short duration of the Assembly. Things will end there.

In conclusion, I would like to say that the Executive and the Legislature have failed us repeatedly. There is no trust in them anymore. Our hope now rests on the judiciary which still appears to be functioning for our common good. Hence, our Hon'ble High Court is requested to order a probe by Central Agencies like the Enforcement Directorate or the CBI. We do not trust any government instituted inquiries because we have

seen over the course of 54 years of statehood that the many inquiries that governments have instituted became mere exercises to distract and hoodwink us.

Yours etc.,  
Samuel Swett,  
Shillong - 2.

#### Beauty of Collective Well-being

Editor,

As a reader, I felt genuinely touched by the article "Worldview of Collective Well-Being" written by HH Mohrmen on the idea of the common good among the Khasi, Pnar, and War communities. Very few articles today make us stop and reflect on what it means to be human.

At a time when customs, traditions, and community life are slowly being pushed aside, this article brings back memories of values that once shaped everyday life. It recalls a way of life where people cared for one another, shared responsibilities, and looked beyond their own households.

The article speaks about beliefs and practices where people, nature, and relationships mattered most. These values of caring, respect for nature, and togetherness feel important in today's divided world. What impressed me most was how death and

mourning are shared by the community. Community visits after a death, keeping the body at home for final respects, continued support during mourning, and help with daily work show a sensitive understanding of loss and healing. Practices like ja-nam (visiting with cooked rice), where families take turns bringing food, reveal how compassion is expressed through simple, thoughtful actions.

Equally meaningful are the customs that maintain family ties even after death. Honouring both maternal and paternal relations and renewing bonds ensure that the bereaved are never left to face grief alone. Such practices help even children understand life and death naturally, without fear or avoidance.

The article also draws attention to other forms of shared responsibility within the community. Customs like ka chep (donation in cash or kind) during times of sorrow and celebration, jakhonboo (offering of food to mother of a new born child) for new mothers, and shared labour through chunong (community sharing of labour) and longhai (labour sharing tradition associated with weeding in jhum cultivation) reflect a spirit of cooperation.

These practices quietly teach dignity, mutual help, and reliance on one another. Traditional village institu-

tions and voluntary leadership further show how community welfare once took precedence over personal interest.

While reading the article, I was reminded how humane and balanced a society can be. If similar practices existed everywhere, the world would surely feel more caring and grounded. It is heartening to know that many communities continue to follow these traditions, quietly keeping alive the spirit of humanity. By recording these practices, the author has done more than document history. He makes us reflect on what is slipping away in our present way of life. He has held up a mirror to our present way of life and asked, without accusation, what we may be losing. The fading of such traditions is not just a cultural shift but a weakening of the values that once held communities together.

I would like to conclude by sincerely thanking the author for presenting these beliefs and practices with honesty and care. The article brings back humane values that once guided Khasi, Pnar communities.

Yours etc.,  
Jairaj  
Via email

Letters to the Editor must have the full name, address and contact number of the writer, even if they are sent by email. Only letters with the requisite details will be published.

"Set peace of mind as your highest goal  
and organize your life around it."  
— Brian Tracy

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 182 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2026

### Silence over scandal

THE Epstein files might open a Pandora's Box-- and the Indian angles are getting curiousest and curiousest. The silence on the part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi vis-à-vis the repeated citation of his name in the millions of pages is only matched by the silence from those who have access to the full documents vis-à-vis the top Indian leader. The only straight reference so far is to a meeting the PM held with Israeli leaders, suspectedly at the bidding of President Donald Trump. No other allegation of any scandalous involvement of the PM with Epstein has surfaced. One who met Epstein repeatedly was present Union Minister Hardeep Singh Puri, who argues those meetings had taken place when he was the Indian envoy in the US; not as a member of the Modi ministry. He also rubbishes Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi for indulgence in "innuendo and smear campaign." Things, however, are not as simple as that. The Opposition leader is within his rights to hold forth on such matters of public interest and national importance.

Notably, the link that prominent industrialist Anil Ambani maintained with Epstein has also raised eyebrows, also for the reason that he maintained good relations with Modi. Yet, nothing yet goes to show that he acted at the behest of the PM -- unless fresh information surfaces. A top Indian businessman or diplomat having liaisons with a high-flying financier and child-abuser like Epstein with big connections, including with the likes of Donald Trump, is nothing to scoff at. Trump himself has been a business honcho for decades. By all accounts, the likes of Bill Gates, once the world's richest, too fell into Epstein's trap. This, thus, has turned out to be an epic scandal. The Opposition is thus more justified in raising these issues in Parliament, but their attempts to have a discussion have been stonewalled by the resolute treasury benches and the Lok Sabha speaker too. Chances are that more revelations are forthcoming from the Epstein files in the coming weeks, or in due course of time. A Damocles' sword hangs on the heads of several top personalities, some of whom like Britain's ex-Prince Andrew are already in deep waters and would likely face police investigations. Trump himself may have the wherewithal to protect himself from any harm.

While it must be emphasized that nothing incriminating about the Indian PM has been cited in reports so far, vis-à-vis the Epstein scandal, the matter does not stop there. Fears have been expressed that President Trump, who has access to the full document, is browbeating the Indian PM. Rahul Gandhi says there's fear on Modi's face. The signing of the trade pact between India and the US itself has come under a shadow, with the Opposition raising its eyebrows in this context. It was evident during the Operation Sindoor too that Trump had exerted undue influence on Modi, obviously leading to the abrupt end of the India-Pakistan standoff. A lack of clarity still persists about the way the military operation ended, without achieving its full objective. The reasons behind such decisions are still under a cloud. While the nation demands an explanation, this, however is not forthcoming.

# Meghalaya Under the MDA: When Illegal Coal Became a Statecraft of Death

By Banphira Lang Basaiawmoit

Since taking power in 2018, the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (MDA) has led the state into a dangerous habit: treating wrongdoing as normal. Across two terms, scandals have appeared in one department after another. But nothing shows the fall of governance more clearly than illegal coal mining.

Coal is not just a "scam." Coal has become a system. A shadow economy. A machine that runs on silence, fear, and protection from the powerful. What should have been stopped as a serious crime was allowed to grow. And as it grew, it did not only destroy land and rivers. It began to destroy human life. Opposition parties and civil society called the MDA years "unprecedented, unabated and unabashed corruption." In February 2023, a chargesheet titled The Grand Meghalaya Loot alleged that large-scale fraud thrived with the "knowledge, know-how and blessings of the Chief Minister." The government dismissed this as politics. But the coal story is not a slogan. It is a trail of evidence, court observations, and dead bodies. Coal in Meghalaya has become the graveyard of governance, where law, life, and landscape are buried together.

**Illegal Coal Mining: The Original Sin of MDA Governance:** Long before power scams, rice thefts, or construction frauds, there was coal. Rat-hole mining was banned in 2014 by the National Green Tribunal (NGT). The Supreme Court repeatedly stated that this unsafe mining must stop. Yet after 2018, illegal coal mining did not shrink. It spread. Coal trucks moved openly on highways. Checkpoints became a formality. Fresh coal was shown as "pre-ban stock" as if changing a label could change the truth. A High Court-appointed probe led by Justice B.P. Katakey revealed the scale: over 13 lakh metric tonnes of coal illegally mined was passed off as legal. The report observed that such large-scale illegal mining and transportation could not have occurred without the involvement or failure of state authorities. That is not just carelessness. It points to systemic breakdown. And the deepest horror is this: while coal made some people rich, it also made death common.

**Death Underground: Silence Above**

Rat-hole mining is not mining in the modern sense. It is men crawling into narrow holes in the earth, often without proper light, air, or safety tools. It is danger made routine, because poverty leaves people with few choices. Year after year, miners have died underground. Many were migrant workers. Some drowned. Some suffocated. Some were crushed. The most haunting tragedy came in December 2018, when 15 miners were trapped and killed in a flooded illegal mine in Ksan village. Their disintegrated bodies were recovered after weeks of rescue efforts that drew national and international attention. These deaths were not "accidents." They were the predictable result of allowing a banned industry to continue openly.

And when people tried to expose this truth, the response was violence. In 2018, women's rights activist Agnes Kharshing documented illegal coal transport. She was brutally assaulted in broad daylight by a coal mafia mob. The message was clear: speak the truth, and you may not survive.

By 2023, the Meghalaya High Court openly referred to credible reports alleging that fixed bribe rates were being

paid to police and officials so coal trucks could pass. The Court even hinted at a possible CBI probe. That is the kind of warning a court gives only when it sees a system, not a one-time crime.

Even inside the MDA coalition, pressure rose to the top. The Chief Minister's brother, James K. Sangma, served as Home Minister in the first MDA government until he was removed in 2020 following allegations of involvement in illegal coal transport. Coalition partners demanded his removal. Conrad Sangma stripped him of the Home portfolio. But he was not dropped from power. He was moved to other ministries. Illegal mining continued. Which raises a painful question: was it ever really about one man, or was it always about a whole system?

The coal saga is the clearest proof of MDA's failure to uphold law. A banned activity continued for years as an "open secret." Court orders were treated lightly. Lives were treated as cheap. Nature was treated as expendable.

**The Power Department Saubhagya Scam: Looting in the Name of Light:** If coal shows a crime protected by silence, the Saubhagya case shows public money drained through "official" decisions. Saubhagya was meant to give electricity connections to rural homes. But a 2021 audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) found serious wrongdoing. It said the Power Department gave "undue favours" to a Delhi-based firm and bypassed proper rules. The audit estimated a loss of Rs 149 crore to the state. This means money meant to bring light into homes was mismanaged, diverted, or wasted through distorted tendering.

Around the same time, accusations also arose over the ADB-funded smart metering project. There were claims of inflated costs and tenders shaped for certain vendors. Public anger grew. Political pressure grew. James Sangma eventually had to give up the power portfolio in 2021. Even the BJP, an MDA partner, demanded arrest if evidence showed his involvement. But again, the larger question remained: untouched: when audits point to large losses, why do consequences still feel so small?

**A Collapsing Dome: A Symbol the State Could Not Hide**

In May 2022, the dome of the new Meghalaya Legislative Assembly building collapsed. It fell early one morning. Thankfully no one died. But the collapse became a symbol too perfect to ignore: the house of democracy literally crumbling. The facts that surfaced were shocking. The project cost rose from about Rs 105 crore to Rs 177.8 crore. Around 90 percent of the money (Rs 160 crore) had already been paid even though only around 65 to 70 percent of the work was complete.

More disturbing was the tender story. The contract went to a UP-based state PSU at 21 percent above the original cost after two bidders were disqualified. The winning firm was reported to have sub-contracted significant portions of the work to the same disqualified companies. To ordinary people, this sounded like a simple story: names changed, paperwork done, money released, and quality ignored.

Critics called it the "Assembly Dome Collapse Scam." An inquiry pointed to design flaws, but the tender details suggested something deeper: rules bent to breaking

point. Another detail fuelled public outrage. The executive engineer, Ransom Sutnga, took voluntary retirement and later became an NPP candidate in 2023. The Opposition alleged this was a reward. Whether or not that is proven, the public perception was devastating: failure did not bring punishment, it brought promotion.

**Pandemic Profiteering: COVID-19 Fund Mismanagement**

During COVID-19, people expected the government to protect lives. Instead, official figures suggest that even the pandemic may have been used as an opportunity for misuse. The State Government publicly stated that it spent Rs 816 crore on COVID-19 management. For a small state, that figure shocked many, especially when compared with Manipur, which reportedly spent just over Rs 100 crore despite having more cases and more deaths.

Where did Meghalaya's money go? A key gap deepened the doubt. The Centre released Rs 119.7 crore to Meghalaya for COVID relief. But the state Health Department reportedly told the Assembly that only Rs 76 crore was received. That leaves about Rs 43 crore unaccounted for. Then came another startling contradiction. Dr. Aman War, Director of Health Services, later said that according to his assessment only around Rs 248 crore was actually spent and that he had "no clue" how the government arrived at the Rs 816 crore figure. When officials themselves cannot explain the numbers, public trust collapses. For families who suffered during the pandemic, this is not a technical issue. It is a betrayal.

**Public Distribution Plunder: The Great Rice Scam**

Even ration rice became a target. In July 2021, Assam Police seized 100,000 bags of rice in a warehouse in Kamrup district. The sacks were marked for Meghalaya's Public Distribution System, meant for poor families. Activists alleged that Meghalaya's PDS rice was being diverted and sold outside the state. One lakh bags is not small theft. It is a pipeline. And pipelines do not run without protection, or at least deliberate blindness. A judicial commission was formed. Activists testified. Yet the public still has no clear answer on who benefited, who enabled it, and who was punished.

**Liquor Cartels and Casino Licenses: Testing the Moral Limits:** Two controversies showed the same habit: pushing questionable decisions until public pressure forced retreat. In 2019, Meghalaya's Excise Policy introduced a centralized bonded warehousing system that critics alleged enabled cartelisation in the liquor trade. Opposition parties and traders claimed that control over bonded warehouses became concentrated in a small group of firms, leading to higher prices and reduced competition. While the government denied wrongdoing, the episode raised serious questions about whether regulatory power was being used to restrict, rather than regulate, the market.

Then came the casino licenses. In 2022, the government issued provisional licenses to three firms to open casinos in Khanapara. There was immediate backlash from church leaders, civil society, and opposition parties. Meghalaya has a Christian-majority population, and many saw casinos as a threat to social well-being.

There were also allegations of favouritism in how licenses were issued. Under pressure, the government withdrew. But the damage was done: the public saw how quietly such decisions could be made-- and how slowly accountability followed.

**Cronyism and Nepotism: Family Fiefdoms in Governance**

Beyond major scandals lies a quieter corruption: when power becomes family business. According to opposition leaders and media investigations, critics have pointed to the Dhar family's dominance in government contracts. Ministers Sniawbhalang Dhar and his nephew Dasakhiabha Lamare are linked to Dhar Construction Company (DCC), described as having virtually monopolised road and infrastructure projects across Khasi-Jaintia and Ri-Bhoi during MDA-1. To the public, it looks like a closed circle: power on one side, contracts on the other.

Then there was the Police Vehicle Procurement Scam. In 2022, the CID arrested Assistant Inspector-General (AIG) Gabriel Langrai in connection with a vehicle procurement scam involving purchases without proper procedure, unregistered vehicles, cheaper models billed as expensive ones, and misuse of fuel coupons. An inquiry raised a disturbing question: could such a scheme occur, "without support and blessings" from senior officials? When those meant to enforce the law are accused of breaking it from within, public faith in justice itself begins to erode.

**The Cost of Making Sin Normal**

From 2018 till today, the scandals under the MDA are not isolated incidents. They form a pattern. Wrongdoing was allowed to flourish while the powerful escaped meaningful consequences and citizens were left with anger, shock, and exhaustion.

Coal remains the most painful example because it combines every form of collapse: illegal profit, environmental destruction, violence against whistle-blowers, judicial warnings, and the steady loss of life underground. If coal is the original sin, then much of what followed appears to grow from it.

What is most disturbing is continuity. MDA-1 slid into MDA-2 with little sign of moral correction. Reports are written. Audits are published. Commissions are formed. But accountability at the top is absent or delayed. This creates a dangerous belief that power shields wrongdoing.

Yet Meghalaya has also shown that resistance is possible. Public pressure halted the casino plan. The High Court repeatedly intervened on coal. Civil society and the church raised their voices. These moments show that the conscience of the state is not dead. But conscience alone is not enough. Meghalaya needs consequences. Real investigations. Real punishment. Real change. A government cannot sing hymns on Sunday and protect illegality from Monday to Saturday. When wrongdoing becomes policy and death becomes routine, the state forfeits its moral right to govern.

This is no longer only about scams. It is about the soul of governance in Meghalaya--and whether its people will accept darkness as normal, or demand accountability that cannot be bargained away.

*(The author is a youth leader and Chief Organiser of the Meghalaya Pradesh Congress Seva Dal. His works focuses on grassroots engagement, social justice, and accountable governance.)*

# The Fading Line Between the Digital World and Reality

By Tashvi Aneja

Scrolling aimlessly, swiping subconsciously, and clicking with every blink -- a revolutionized digital world now surrounds us so densely that our ambitions, fears and identities are governed as much by code and pixels as they are by physical experiences.

Picture this: a world where you can no longer tell whether a memory or conversation was real; where you're not sure if a face or friendship is simply Artificial Intelligence, where the digital version of yourself feels more admired and authentic than your real reflection. This is not fiction. The boundary between the digital world and reality is fading rapidly. The old saying 'seeing is believing' no longer holds. Many of us already live in overlapping universes, where the digital world does not just co-exist but might be overshadowing our physical world.

AI has rapidly become an uncredited co-author across text, images, video, and web content, generating highly personalised work at scale. Though it recombines existing data rather than creating truly original ideas, it produces convincing authenticity. Automated insights alone generated over one billion algorithmic stories in 2014, and today many top search results contain AI-written text.

As readers struggle to distinguish human from machine output and detection tools remain unreliable, questions of trust, credibility, and authorship grow more urgent in a world where digital and human creation increasingly blur.

Human decisions stem from past experiences and knowledge, which leave digital footprints that algorithms capture as data proxies to influence and engineer what we see, feel, and do, creating an echo chamber that reinforces existing views and blocks alternative ideas, all disguised as personalisation. Our social media feeds, news suggestions, and video recommendations are cleverly curated by opaque algorithmic systems which push filtered narratives. This biased content online often grabs users' attention and moulds perceptions without anyone questioning the complete picture. We believe this to be real and factual without realizing that our remote is in the hands of a system, a system which has become our master.

Earlier youth identities were built internally; now they are externally anchored. Youth identity crisis is becoming increasingly prevalent, with a majority of it shaped by a digital ecosystem where their sense of self is constantly split across platforms. A sheer number of digital spaces creates feelings of self-fragmentation and a lack of temporal narrative coherence, making it hard for adolescents to form a stable identity. Their focus on what gets them attention instead of what truly reflects them, causes constant shape shifting to please others or fit algorithmic trends. They end up managing multiple personas and split their online and offline selves. As they attempt to pull together the scattered pieces of themselves across several platforms and media, they struggle to understand and define their true selves, contributing to impostor syndrome among individuals, particularly youth.

Impostor syndrome is also magnified by algorithms for content creators. Creators may feel that their success is a by-product of virality or algorithmic luck, not genuine talent. They ask themselves, "Am I good, or am I just performing for the algorithm?" They often feel the pressure to stay relevant and present an ever-sharpened version of themselves, even if it may not be their authentic selves. Focusing engagement to please others masks their real identity with their digital persona. Additionally, with the growing use of AI, authenticity comes into question for content creators.

Beyond impostor syndrome, increasing online interactions raise other mental health concerns, too. FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) is not new, but over-reliance on digital world supercharges it. A study found that exposure to idealized athletic images reduced self-esteem in 37% of participants, particularly young women who frequently compare themselves to influencers. Constantly scrolling through

curated highlights makes ordinary life feel inadequate, ignoring that social media mostly showcases highs, not lows.

With AR filters and deep-fakes amplifying perfection, comparison intensifies. Profile curation, unrealistic standards, and the pursuit of validation tie self-worth to likes and followers rather than real achievements. This fuels anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, and a deep erosion of self-confidence.

Moreover, since a large chunk of our thinking happens in digital context, neural pathways adapt and optimize information processing, decision making, and problem solving for digital media. While some argue that it improves multitasking, it also declines focus and inhibits deep and critical thinking. Eventually, our real life begins to echo the digital one, and vice versa.

The real world is no longer just mirroring the digital world, it is amplifying the crisis of identity and algorithmic control. Chat-bots and algorithms reflect our interests and behaviours back to us, creating feedback loops where online trends begin shaping offline actions.

Search for one product and you're soon surrounded by ads and recommendations. Over time, this repetition does more than guide behaviour, it shapes perception, making digital cues feel more real than lived experience. As dependency grows, the line between perception and presence blurs, and offline life begins to mirror digital patterns.

Our digital footprint feeds predictive systems, shifting thought from self-directed to system-conditioned. Immersive technologies like VR intensify this effect, as the brain records virtual input as real, sometimes creating altered or false memories. Reality is no longer binary but a spectrum, where people increasingly live, choose, and connect within hybrid digital-physical spaces.

As more interactions happen online through screens, filters, and bots, trust weakens. We often can't tell real from fake. Is it edited or genuine? We miss tone and body language, so misunderstandings grow. In virtual friendships or relationships, it's hard to know what's truly genuine, making trust feel uncertain.

With the rise of fake and synthesized content, we are forced to question what is real anymore. Hyper-realistic videos, AI-generated conversations, and filtered identities blur authenticity to the point where trust feels fragile. Suspicion seeps into everything, memories, friendships, even our own perceptions.

We now look at a striking photograph or a beautifully written essay and assume it must be AI-made. Instead of appreciating genuine talent, we question its authenticity. This raises a chilling possibility: are we losing the ability to recognize what is real, or worse, to trust ourselves?

Individuals must regularly audit their digital footprint, limit screen time, prioritize in-person connections, and reflect on their consumption habits to prevent algorithms from shaping perception. Educators should strengthen digital literacy, teaching students to detect deep-fakes and build healthy coping strategies. Creators must foster trust through authenticity and transparency about AI or filters. Parents need to model balanced digital behaviour and create emotionally safe spaces at home. Tech companies should prioritize ethical design and user control, while policymakers must enforce safeguards for fairness, safety, accountability, and youth protection. Today, we stand at a crossroads between a dazzling hyper-connected digital world and timeless richness of physical reality. The danger isn't simply choosing one over the other, but it's forgetting the value of both. Instead of letting the digital realm shape our entire lives, we should simply let it amplify our humanity. No algorithm, no VR system, no AI-generated masterpiece can truly replace the real -- real conversation, real touch, real life. The future belongs to those who master their minds, not their feeds. Technology should widen our perception, not shrink our sense of self.

*(The writer is a First Year B.Tech Student, Plaksha University, Mohali.)*

## Letters to the Editor

### Have a heart for coal mine labourers

Editor,  
Everyone wishes that the deadly mine blast at Mynsyngat, Thangsko, Jaintia Hills had never happened. But it happened. Because we refused to learn from the tragedies that rocked our past. Each time, the lives lost, particularly those of poor labourers, were brushed aside. And this is the bitter truth! The way labourers in

Meghalaya extract coal, often merely to survive, is a heartbreaking spectacle. They juggle death every hour, every day, inside those vertical shafts and horizontal tunnels. One slip of the foot, one crack in the roof, and they vanish into the darkness down below. There is absolutely no account of how many individuals have met their maker this way. What is most off-putting is that many workers enter these narrow tunnels without proper helmets, gloves, boots, or respirators. Many crawl into the black holes bare-handed, armed only with picks, chisels, and shovels. I don't

think any mining experts have trained them.

What if someone were to ask a young boy to roast meat and bake tandoori roti in a blazing fire, without tongs, without a spatula, without even showing him how to hold the tools? The boy would surely burn his hands. That is exactly how miners are asked to crawl into rat-hole shafts -- unprotected, untrained, and forced to fight against darkness, poisonous gases, and unpredictable collapses. Isn't every minute underground a gamble with life-and-death? Yes, every strike of the pickaxe is made merely to earn

a few rupees to stay alive. One wonders how one can genuinely express sympathy for their compulsion born of poverty. It really brings tears to our eyes!

Of course, I often get lost in thought, reflecting on how kind Mother Nature is. She has blessed Meghalaya with so many minerals -- coal, limestone, uranium, granite, sand, and more. But here's the most haunting question: are these natural riches meant "only for this century?" If we keep mining recklessly, greedily, without regulation and foresight for the future, won't we exhaust them sooner

than we think?

I strongly believe these minerals are not just for us, not just for this generation. They are the inheritance of generations to come--our grandchildren and great-grandchildren, for as long as this planet exists. To plunder them, today is nothing but betraying tomorrow. When will we awaken to this serious truth? Sadly, what we studied in schools and colleges about this serious concern and environmental fallout has come to nothing.

Let me add: what will it look like if our grandchildren have to import coal from

Bihar and Jharkhand, while their textbooks only whisper: "Meghalaya was once very rich in coal and limestone." One cannot help but grieve at how many more lives must be swallowed by these dark tunnels, and how many more scars must our hills bear, before we finally awaken.

Yours etc.,  
Salil Gawai,  
Shillong

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*"The power of thought is the only thing over which you have absolute control."*

— William Walker Atkinson

## The Shillong Times

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### Congress-less Assembly session

THIS assembly session scheduled to be held from February 16-27 is expected to be a fiery one revolving around the illegal coal mining and the death of over 30 labourers owing to a dynamite blast gone wrong. Currently there are only 9 Opposition MLAs in the 60-member Assembly – 5 from the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) and 4 from the Voice of Peoples Party (VPP). The VPP has been very vehement in its stance on illegal coal mining after the recent blast at Thangsko in East Jaintia Hills and the loss of 32 lives so far. In fact the VPP Chief Ardent Basaiawmoit had even demanded that Chief Minister Conrad Sangma should step down and take moral responsibility for being unable to put a stop to illegal coal mining despite the repeated mine accidents that have claimed lives since 2018 and even before that but the matter never came to light. Leader of Opposition, Dr Mukul Sangma too has castigated the Government for being in denial about illegal coal mining even while this trade was carried out surreptitiously under the very eyes of the Government. This despite the National Green Tribunal's directive to that effect since April 2014.

Recently when Meghalaya Congress chief, Vincent Pala was asked for his views on the recent blast that claimed over 30 lives he gave some wishy-washy answer and that is understandable. No MLA from Jaintia Hills can win elections if he/she were to take a firm stance on banning illegal coal mining. Even the VPP while campaigning for the Lok Sabha elections had stated that coal mining is a traditional livelihood and that the Party would ensure that the ban was lifted by taking the issue up at the right quarters at the level of the central government and by pushing for scientific mining. No wonder the VPP won with a huge margin in the Lok Sabha elections from Jaintia Hills. The Congress is reduced to a cipher in the State Assembly and has not shown any assertiveness to revive the Party at the state level. Apart from the occasional protests by the Mahila Congress the Party has not shown any inclination to take on the MDA-2 Government with the fervour shown by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi in taking on the Modi Government during the ongoing Parliament session. Hence the only Opposition to the MDA-2 Government has to come from the AITC and the VPP. In fact, the two parties should remain committed to peoples' issues and not fritter away the time of the Assembly in political one-upmanship and thereby allow the Government to get away with blasé explanations on its acts of omission and commission.

There are too many issues that have to be taken up in the Assembly and people look up to the Opposition to take on the present Government which has been lax in data collection on some critical issues affecting the state. Does Meghalaya today have the exact number of people living below the poverty line? Does the state have the number of children that have dropped out of school at various stages of their educational journey? Without the statistics the Government is groping in the dark and is unable to address the most pressing issues afflicting the people of the state. The Opposition therefore must also be held to account by the people that voted them to power.

### Letters to the Editor

### No Traffic Jam for the Army

Editor,  
It was quite amusing to read that the Defence forces have rejected the government of Meghalaya's proposal to create a flyover from Rillbong to Barik point. They were quoted as citing security concerns.

What a laugh. This is in an age of satellite imagery and drones where everything has changed to such an extent that security has become digitalised. The bosses in question probably never feel the need because they are permitted to weave through the traffic with their red lights and sirens blaring.

The traffic police can and should rightfully stop these people from overtaking and to crawl like the common people are doing every day. Probably this is the only solution to make them see reason.

Yours etc.,  
Dr. Tridib Kakoty,  
Via email

### Mawbah Road Devastated & Slow Pace of Repair

Editor,  
It has now been over two weeks since this vital road of the thickly populated Mawbah Barapathar area was dug

up for laying the main PHE pipeline. Digging the road for laying a water pipeline is understandable and necessary. However, the manner in which the road is being repaired has caused severe inconvenience and frustration among the residents of this densely populated locality.

While the digging work was completed almost overnight, possibly with the use of JCB machines, the repair work is being carried out manually by only four to five labourers. The pace of restoration is extremely slow, and the work appears to be proceeding without urgency. As a result, the dug-up road remains in a deplorable condition, causing immense hardship to pedestrians, commuters, and motorists who are compelled to use this road daily.

The contractor responsible for the digging and repair should also be mindful that this road connects six cremation and burial grounds of different faiths. People carrying dead bodies for cremation or burial are facing great hardship and emotional distress while passing through this broken and uneven stretch of road.

In addition, during medical emergencies, ambulances and other vehicles face serious difficulty in navigating this damaged road, potentially endangering lives. Although the rainy season has not yet begun, any rainfall will make the loose soil and uneven surface dangerously slippery, significantly

Even by the morally vacuous standards of social media, a venomous video put up by the Assam BJP marks a new low. The controversial video – now deleted – showed Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma using an air rifle at 'point blank' range aiming at two men, one in a skull cap, the other bearded. While the video purportedly claimed to be targeting Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants and standing up for ethnic Assamese identity, the violent communal imagery could not have been more starkly spiteful. A chief minister of a state, a constitutionally elected leader, pointing his gun at Muslims, is the most egregious example of a brazen violation of constitutional responsibilities.

A crafty politician, Sarma has rather disingenuously claimed that he has no knowledge of any such video. But the deniability carries little weight. The video was put up by the Assam BJP on its official handle on X (formerly Twitter). It garnered more than a million views before it was taken down. The video wasn't an aberration either. For months now, Sarma has led a sustained, toxic campaign against 'Miyas', a crude perjorative term used against Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam. He has even called for an economic boycott of 'Miyas', be it shopkeepers, vegetable vendors or autorickshaw drivers. Far from being apologetic about his stance, Sarma has justified his utterances as 'necessary' to protect Assam's cultural-civilisational ethos.

It is apparent that an unapologetic Sarma senses electoral benefit in his constant anti-Muslim slurs. At a time when the Congress campaign has focussed on allegations of big ticket corruption against the chief minister and his family, communal tropes are both weapons of mass distraction and of division. Anger and resentment against the 'outsider' has been part of Assam's complex ethnic landscape for decades now; Sarma has positioned himself as a loudspeaker of popular grievances against a demographic re-ordering in the state. With some estimates pointing to a 38 per cent Muslim population in the state, it is easy to stir fears, real and imaginary, against demographic change and cultural dilution.

increasing the risk of accidents for both pedestrians and vehicles if timely repairs are not carried out.

With schools having reopened, many parents are ferrying their children on scooters and driving through this devastated road has become highly unsafe. Even daily users of this road have been facing continuous problems in commuting for the past two weeks.

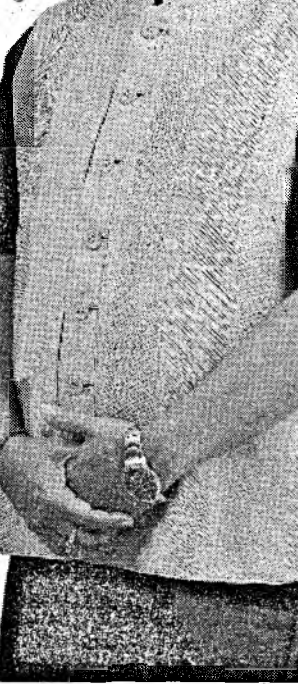
In view of the above facts, the contractor and the concerned authorities responsible for laying the pipeline and restoring the road are earnestly requested to recognize the gravity of the situation and take immediate steps to repair the road on a war footing.

Yours etc.,  
Krishna Chettri,  
Shillong -2

### Epstein Files & National Security

Editor,  
Apropos of the editorial "Tower of Silence" (ST February 11, 2026), General M.M. Naravane's unpublished memoir Four Stars of Destiny has become a political flashpoint, but based on what is known so far, he did not explicitly accuse the Prime Minister or the Defence Minister of abdication of their responsibility. The book reportedly includes reflections on the Galwan clash (2020) and the broader

Which is where the incendiary video's messaging becomes intensely problematic. What qualifies prima facie as hate speech outside Assam is pitched as a defence of the historical/linguistic/cultural/economic rights of the indigenous population within the



state. Far from it provoking outrage, the video has been justified in Assam as reflect-

identity politics.

Not surprisingly, the BJP central leadership has maintained a cryptic silence on the offensive video. The 'sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas' slogan is a brand-building exercise meant to soften global audiences; in poll-bound Assam, there is political dividend to be reaped in keeping the communal pot boiling. Which is why every time prime minister Modi or home minister Amit Shah visit Assam, they don't forget to remind audiences about the dangers posed by 'ghuspetiyas' or 'illegal infiltrators'. That international borders are meant to be policed by central forces is conveniently ignored.

Even the so-called 'secular' lobby has been virtually brow-beaten into submission by the triumphal march of majoritarian politics. While a few concerned citizens have filed a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court calling for stern action against those responsible for the video, there is a marked reluctance on part of the political class in general to confront the Sarma brand of communal politics for fear that it will further alienate Hindu voters. Where once

*"It is apparent that an unapologetic Sarma senses electoral benefit in his constant anti-Muslim slurs. At a time when the Congress campaign has focussed on allegations of big ticket corruption against the chief minister and his family, communal tropes are both weapons of mass distraction and of division. Anger and resentment against the 'outsider' has been part of Assam's complex ethnic landscape for decades now; Sarma has positioned himself as a loudspeaker of popular grievances against a demographic re-ordering in the state."*

ing the state's lived political consciousness. If the 2002 Gujarat riots were linked to Gujarati asmita (self-respect) by then chief minister Narendra Modi, a similar playbook is being practised in Assam as part of distinct ethnic

Muslim minority appeasement was the charge levelled against parties like the Congress, now it is competition for majority Hindu voters that guides political decision-making. If an Asaduddin Owaisi has filed a police

complaint against Sarma in Hyderabad it is because he doesn't need the Hindu vote to win.

Which explains why Sarma can get away with hate speech with such impunity. A long-serving Congressman's defection to become BJP's saffron posterboy, the transition is a reflection of opportunistic shifts in contemporary Indian politics being disguised as personal clashes or ideological incompatibility. The Assam chief minister in 2015 had famously claimed that he had left the Congress because Rahul Gandhi had 'humiliated' him at a private meeting by preferring to feed biscuits to his puppy rather than addressing Assam's concerns. Truth is, when Sarma's ambitions could not be accommodated within the Congress, the BJP became a secure alternative. The fact that the BJP had previously charged Sarma with corruption was quietly forgotten: all the cases against him were dropped or slowed down once he switched sides in a classic 'washing machine' early prototype.

As a 57 year old 'strongman' politician, Sarma is now in the front row of BJP's Gen-Next. This is a generation that is not chained by political correctness, moral rectitude or constitutional values as to some extent the BJP's leaders of the Atal-Bhadrani era were. This is a generation that is driven by an obsessive urge for political power above all else. Which is why Sarma as the party's principal North-East face; practised election manager and trouble-shooter is seen as an invaluable asset. Right-thinking citizens will be appalled by Sarma's anti-Muslim vocabulary but for the rank and file of the BJP, his 'in your face' dog-whistle politics fits in with a 'Hindu Rashtra' dream project. The mask is well and truly off.

Post-script: When Himanta Biswa Sarma announced his decision to leave the Congress, a senior Congress leader reportedly warned his party high command: 'He is a leader for the future, we will miss someone like him.' A decade on, the 'face of the future' is part of a darkened present.

(The writer is senior journalist and author. His latest book is 2024: The Election That Surprised India. Mail: rajdeepsardesai52@gmail.com)

as national interest has not been compromised. "Too much need not be read" suggests that incidental mentions (like Modi's name in Epstein's emails) should not automatically be treated as evidence of wrongdoing. "As long as national interest has not been compromised" establishes the threshold: the real concern is whether India's security, diplomacy, or sovereignty were harmed. If not, then the controversy is more about perception than substance.

Opposition parties may amplify the mention for reputational damage, but the government emphasizes that no national interest was affected. Citizens are left balancing sensational disclosures against official clarifications. Modi's name appears only in relation to his 2017 Israel trip, which was a legitimate state visit. That makes the "national interest" test crucial: there is no evidence of compromise. The editorial statement essentially argues for restraint in interpretation unless the files reveal actions that tangibly harmed India's national interest, the controversy should not be overblown. It is a call to separate political noise from substantive risk.

Yours etc;  
VK Lyngdoh,  
Via email

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## Peel, Process, and Pixel: Age of Mind-factures

By Maitphang Syiem

Consider the orange, it is a fruit that demands effort before it yields its rewards. You have to peel it, deal with the sticky zest, and navigate the occasional rogue seed before you get to the juice. Historically, the colour orange has been the bridge between the red of raw passion and the yellow of pure intellect. In ancient Egypt, it adorned the tombs of pharaohs to signify eternity; in India, it represents the sacred quest for knowledge; and for Native Americans, it symbolizes communal kinship. But in 2013, two gentlemen from Colombia, Felipe Buitrago Restrepo and Iván Duque Márquez, decided that "Orange" was also the perfect brand for an economic powerhouse: the Orange Economy. Published through the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), their manual defined it as a group of linked activities where ideas are the raw materials and intellectual property is the final product.

Today, we aren't just squeezing oranges, we are squeezing our brains. Welcome to the age of "Mind-factures" where the intangible symbolic value of a pixel far exceeds its mere utility. In this context it is obvious that there will be a strong nexus between Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Orange Economy which may resonate like a first date between a poet and a calculator, awkward at first, but potentially life changing. In the realm of AVGC (Animation, Visual Effects, Gaming, and Comics), AI is not just a tool, it is a "force multiplier". While some fear that AI will replace the creator, however the analytical truth is that AI excels in pattern-recognition, not imagination. It can generate thousands of ad variations in seconds, but it cannot define the emotional "meaning" or cultural resonance of a story.

We are entering a "Synthetic Renaissance," where human-AI symbiosis allows us to move from being a "Creator Factory" of cheap outsourced labour to a "Creator Headquarters" where we own the original Intellectual Property (IP). The four pillars of this new world are clear: Culture (our unique heritage), Creativity (our human talent), Technology (the AI engine), and Intellectual Property (our sovereign wealth). Globally, creative industries already generate trillions of dollars of revenue and a significant share of world GDP, while relying more on talent and technology than on smokestacks and mines. If the Orange Economy is about ideas, artificial intelligence is the new electricity running through its circuits where every frame, texture and storyline is a "Mind-factured" product, shaped increasingly by AI-powered tools. Properly governed, AI doesn't replace the Orange Economy; it supercharges it. The Orange Economy thrives on Culture, Creativity, Technology and Intellectual Property and mature Orange Economy sits when it is culturally rooted, creatively bold, technologically fluent and legally protected.

The Union Budget for 2026-27 has signalled that India is treating imagination as infrastructure. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's announcement to establish AVGC Content Creator Labs in 15,000 secondary schools and 500 colleges is a masterstroke in democratizing creative digital skills. Supported by the Indian Institute of Creative Technologies (IICT) in Mumbai, this initiative aims to prepare a workforce of 2 million professionals by 2030.

Critically, this budget looks beyond the able-bodied by supporting the state-run ALIMCO to scale up the production of prosthetics using AI and R&D, the government is ensuring that Persons with Disabilities (Divyangjan) are not just beneficiaries of technology, but participants in the economy. In a pixel-driven world, a physical barrier is no longer a professional barrier. Whether you are in a wheelchair or a remote village, if you can manipulate a pixel, you can participate in global value chains.

For our unemployed youth and school dropouts, the Orange Economy offers a unique escape from the "wage labour" trap. AVGC is a sector where portfolios matter more than pedigrees. A dropout with a talent for 3D modelling or digital storytelling can find

a sustainable livelihood that traditional manufacturing cannot offer. It is suggested that a "Stackable Learning" where NSQF-aligned micro-credentials allows youth to earn, industry ready certifications without needing a degree be looked into. We need Apprenticeship Programmes where young creators can avail stipends to sustain their skilling or upskilling. AI powered tools will lower entry barriers by reducing the need for expensive hardware and long production cycles, allowing young creators to prototype short films, game levels or comics from basic devices and cloud software. With structured mentoring, online communities and micro-credentials, even those who left formal education can build credible careers as freelance animators, indie game developers or digital storytellers.

The Government of Meghalaya, under "Mission 10," aims to reach a \$10 billion economy by 2028. But how do we fund the creative gold rush? We need a data-driven decision-making approach and to turn this potential into a pipeline, Meghalaya in particular needs sector-specific incubation and apprenticeship programmes. We should strategically set up AVGC Hubs or Clusters in every district. This isn't just about computers; it's about making skills accessible to all genders and backgrounds. These hubs can host Train-the-Trainer (TTT) programmes, ensuring that local teachers become mentors for project-based learning. By fostering collaborations with industry giants (as IICT Mumbai is doing), we can open up business models where the IP ownership remains with our local youth and if collectively done right these structures will give unemployed youth especially dropouts a ladder from curiosity to craft to cash flow. Having said, the real challenge will not be scarcity of content or resources but precision in investment.

Every part of Meghalaya is a masterpiece of natural placement and the land itself is asking us to grow creatively and sustainably and as reported, Orange Economy aligns perfectly with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Environmentally well managed Creative industries will potentially have low carbon footprint (SDGs 11, 12, 13, 14, 15), promote gender equality (SDG 5), Education (SDG 4), Decent Work (SDG 8) Innovation (SDG 9) and Reduced inequalities (SDG 10).

Every hill in Meghalaya has a story to tell and, in the Orange Economy, stories are the most valuable export. From the whistled lullabies (Jingrai lawbei) of Kongthong to the weaving stories of Eri silk from Umden and many more, we have living museums that can be scaled into global tourism products through digital storytelling. We don't need to cut down our forests to grow; we need to digitize our folklore. However, this requires a collective political drive that treats creativity as a serious career pathway, not a niche hustle. We must bridge the digital divide by pushing digital literacy, last mile digital connectivity and if supported with AI tools, digital infrastructure, fair IP frameworks and a genuine, sustained political commitment. In this manner an orange ecosystem can grow in a way that protects forests and rivers even as it exports films, games and experiences.

We are standing at the edge of a Synthetic Renaissance. For the creative youth of Meghalaya, the transition to an Orange Economy is not just about jobs; it is about identity and in the age of "mind-factures," the most valuable factory is the human imagination, and Meghalaya's hills are already humming with production. The question is whether we choose to just admire the orange, or finally peel, process and pixel it into a future that is vibrant, inclusive, sustainable, eco-centric and unmistakably our own. The juice is worth the squeeze. As the economist John Howkins famously said "Creativity is not new and neither is economics, but what is new is the nature and extent of the relationship between them".

(The writer is a Geo-spatial Technology Expert & Citizen Science practitioner)

# For \$40, you can name star for your Valentine. But it won't mean much

With Valentine's Day around the corner, romance is in the air. And what could be more romantic than a picnic under the stars, pointing up to the night sky, and gazing at a star you've named for your Valentine? A quick online search reveals multiple paid services for naming a star, usually accompanied by a certificate and a star map for finding the star.

However, these names are not official and are not used by astronomers. According to the International Astronomical Union's Working Group on Star Names, the official body that leads the selection of star names, "the sky is not owned by anyone". So what names do astronomers use for stars, and how are official star names selected?

## Pay to name a star

Star-naming services offer a range of paid packages — some costing just A\$40 — and add-ons to name a star or two.

If you dig into the FAQs, you can usually find a disclaimer stating that the star names are recorded in their private database. They have to include this, as the International Astronomical Union explicitly states stars cannot be named after people (except for rare cases).

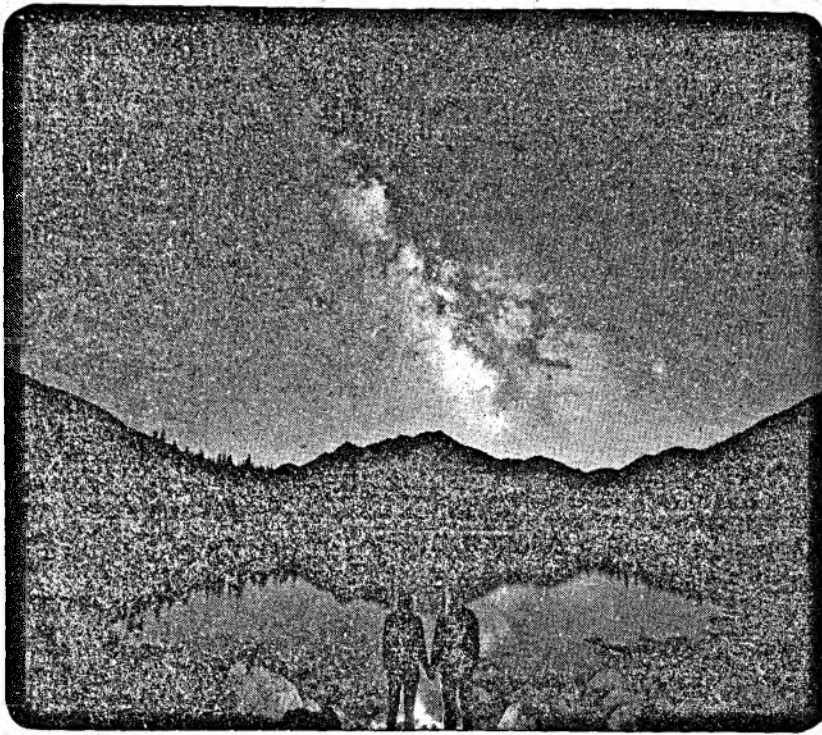
Even without these rules and disclaimers, these websites have too many customers and not enough stars.

Many websites that sell star names claim the star will be visible to the naked eye. For those with excellent vision, stargazing on a dark night, roughly 2,500 stars are visible to the naked eye (5,000 in both hemispheres).

And if you pay for a higher-priced package including only "extra bright stars" or visible binary systems (two stars orbiting each other), the number is even smaller.

Yet some of these websites claim to have 100,000-plus, or even 500,000-plus, satisfied customers.

This means that each star has been named at least 20 times. It's a smidge less romantic when your Valentine's



name is the 20th, or even 100th, name for a star.

## Proper process of naming stars

Astronomers never use these purchased names. Instead, we use proper names and designations for stars. Stars can only have one official proper name, such as the stars Sirius, Betelgeuse and Polaris.

But many have a whole bunch of designations. Designations are unique combinations of letters and numbers used by astronomers when creating surveys and catalogues of stars. Most stars don't have a proper name, but all known stars have at least one designation.

Fewer than 600 stars have a proper name. This is out of more than one billion stars that have been identified by astronomers.

The International Astronomical Union's Working Group on Star Names keeps an up-to-date list. New stars were most recently added on December 25 2025. The working group has guidelines and rules for

naming stars, sometimes including the public in the process.

Typically, star names are rooted in history and culture. Collecting historical and indigenous constellations is part of the working group's strategy. For example, one of the most recently named stars is called "Sarvis", a name used by the Sami people of Northern Scandinavia.

Designations tell astronomers which telescope saw the star. This tells us information about the star, such as what types of light it emits. Sirius has more than 60 designations, including 2MASS J06450887-1642566, HIP 32349 and CNS5 1676.

"2MASS" is the Two Micron All-Sky Survey in infrared, so this tells us Sirius emits infrared light. "HIP" refers to the European Space Agency Hipparcos mission, and tells us Sirius is a bright optical star. The "CNS5" is the Fifth Catalogue of Nearby Stars, telling us Sirius is closer than 25 parsecs (or 82 light years) from the Sun.

The numbers "J06450887-

1642566" are the coordinates of the star, and "32349" and "1676" are unique numbers to identify Sirius specifically in those catalogues.

## New star names are rare

I have given many stars new designations in my Sydney Radio Star Catalogue. I also gave the star TYC 8332-2529-1 the new designation MKT J170456.2-482100 when I detected it for the first time using the MeerKAT telescope.

In that case, "MKT" stands for "MeerKAT" and the numbers give the coordinates of the star at the time we detected it. That star only has designations, no proper name. Stars can always get new designations when a new survey of the sky is performed or a new catalogue is constructed. This is why some stars have tens of designations.

The International Astronomical Union's Working Group on Star Names guidelines prohibit commercial, political or military names and even prohibit naming stars after pet animals. Since official star naming is focused on historical and cultural names, it is rare for new star names to emerge.

Even for naming campaigns open to the public run by the International Astronomical Union, only stars too faint to be seen by the naked eye are considered. A very recent official star name is "Siwarha" — a name suggested by the team that discovered the star. The name means "her bracelet" and is the name for Betelgeuse's small companion star.

So it is rare, but not impossible, for astronomers to name the stars they discover.

You can't officially name a star after your Valentine. But you can plan a romantic evening of stargazing and point out the officially named stars visible at this time of year. Betelgeuse, Sirius and Rigel can be seen in Australia in the early evening on Valentine's Day. (*The Conversation*)

(Authored by Laura Nicole Driessen, University of Sydney)

# Dating platforms are not really optimising love

In the weeks leading up to Valentine's Day, dating apps typically see a spike in new users and activity. More profiles are created, more messages sent, more swipes logged.

Dating platforms market themselves as modern technological solutions to loneliness, right at your fingertips. And yet, for many people, the day meant to celebrate romantic connection feels lonelier than ever.

This, rather than a personal failure or the reality of modern romance, is the outcome of how dating apps are designed and of the economic logic that governs them. These digital tools aren't simply interfaces that facilitate connection. The ease and expansiveness of online dating have commodified social bonds, eroded meaningful interactions and created a type of dating throw-away culture, encouraging a sense of disposability and distorting decision-making.

## The business of modern dating

Online dating apps are big business. Match Group, a technology company that dominates the online dating sector with an extensive portfolio of dating app products — including Tinder, Hinge, Match.com, OkCupid, Plenty of Fish and OurTime — reported fourth-quarter revenue of USD 878 million this month.

Its analysis showed fewer people are paying for its apps, with paying users down five per cent year over year. The decline appears to reflect a trend prompting the company to develop new artificial intelligence tools to drive user growth and appeal to younger customers. Part of this means converting free users into paying ones. Dating apps don't sell love. They sell the feeling that it is one premium upgrade away. The platforms aren't primarily designed for users to find love and promptly delete the apps from their phones. They're designed to keep users swiping.

## Why swiping never ends

Prolonged uncertainty is profitable. By creating the sense that a better match is always one swipe away users are kept engaged. Design strategies that gamify choice, offer intermittent variable rewards (like a slot machine) and frequent push notifications pro-

duce a fear-of-missing-out mentality and can lead to compulsive and addictive patterns of use.

Maximizing user interaction and time spent on the app, and accumulating consumer data turn users into lucrative opportunities for paid features, monthly subscriptions and advertising dollars.

Dating apps market the idea that dating platforms can achieve our social goals more efficiently and more intelligently, meeting a real-world need with a technological solution.

In this system, people are expected to constantly improve and optimise themselves. Paying for added features becomes an investment in oneself, while value is determined by desirability, performance and outcomes.

By creating an interesting profile, crafting witty messages and curating photos and videos of ourselves, we commodify our time and self-worth, reinforcing the idea that we alone are responsible for our success on the apps, even if the playing field is strategically manipulated to keep us on them longer.

## Changing social reality

Online dating apps sell us hope by exploiting our needs, desires and insecurities. When apps keep hinting that something better is just one more swipe away, they start to reshape our expectations, and even inflate them.

Typically, people employ a decision-making strategy called "satisficer," which refers to both "satisfy" and "suffice." This means we generally choose something that's good enough, rather than searching endlessly for perfection, because of limits on time, information and cognitive energy. In relationship decisions, compatibility used to be enough.

With apps, there's an endless supply of options — endless potential partners, endless possibilities. The issue is that the options feel infinite and, as a result, we're being trained not to be satisfied anymore. Rather, we're encouraged to keep swiping.

The platforms serve as central planners of resource access, production and distribution, offering the information and databases that guide decisions in a global market of potential partners. (*The Conversation*)

## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, FEBRUARY 15, 2026

### 'Birthday Forecast'

Moon semi-sextile Mercury on your solar return chart and it is going to give excellent results for the whole year. You will be assertive and will be able to take quick decisions. You will also get lot of opportunities at your place of work to rise. You will also get an important position or responsibility which you will manage well. Your colleagues and bosses will support you. New contacts in professional set up will help you a lot. Those in business can enter a new partnership or association. You will also make a major investment. You will also be able to recover money that you gave to friends. There is a likelihood of a lively love affair that may end in marriage. Your family members will support you. There will be joyous atmosphere in the family. Loved ones will come closer to each other. You will also buy a new vehicle or house of your own choice. Auspicious functions will keep taking place.

### 'This week for you'

**Aries : (March 21 - April 20)** It is going to be a peaceful week. You will be a lot more relaxed and look towards life with a positive attitude. You will look after your elderly people well and take care of their health. You will also complete your pending tasks. You will also earn profits in your profession. Your respect will also increase. New job opportunities will be available. Positive events will also take place. You will be spending some quality time with your family. Marriage proposals for singles will come. You will also be keen on making new friends. Your name and fame will spread far and wide. Financial position is going to be strong and stable. You will develop interest in Yoga, Meditation and prayer.

**Taurus : (April 21 - May 21)** You will earn profits in your profession. Your self-respect will also increase. Your financial position will get better. New job opportunities will be available for you. You will also get connected politically with important personalities. You will also benefit from your relatives and friends. A big order or deal may also come your way. You will also meet high ranking officials who will help you in moving forward in your life. You will have wonderful time with your family. You need to cut your expenses. Your situation will also improve. Your desired tasks will get completed. Your mind will also be kind and happy. You will turn religious and spiritual in nature.

**Gemini : (May 22 - June 21)** It is going to be a week of mixed fortunes for you. You will have misunderstandings with some people. Your enemies and opponents will be a cause of worry. You will also have a fight with your spouse. But matter will get resolved. You will also have monetary benefits. With your strong will power you will start moving towards success. You will also face every problem with the help of your intelligence and cleverness. You will complete your work peacefully. The time is extremely favorable for you. You will also make many plans to gain profits. Your health will be good. Take care of your diet and eat healthy food. You will turn religious and spiritual in nature.

**Cancer : (June 22 - July 22)** Time is favorable. Take your work favorably and work in right earnest. Don't try to run away from challenges instead face it with determination. You will get victory everywhere. You can't afford to be complacent. You will also get a lot of practical knowledge and know truths of life. Property related disputes will also get resolved due to someone's mediation. Your business activities will continue as before. Students will be interested in studies. You will feel mentally satisfied. You will give preference to your work and give time to these activities. Peace and harmony will prevail in family ties. Loved ones will come closer to each other. Marriage plans might be made. Good news might be received from relatives or close ones.

**Leo : (July 23 - August 23)** There will be positive developments that will make you feel happy and better. The time is extremely favorable for you. You will complete your work peacefully. Husband and wife will understand each other's feelings and lend support to each other. You will also make many plans to gain profits. You will also have good working relation with your bosses. Do not lend money to someone otherwise it will get stuck. Some important decisions need to be taken in your personal life. To earn money will be your target. Your confidence will be high. You will also receive support from your brothers. An atmosphere of happiness will surround your family. You will feel very active and energetic. Peace and harmony will prevail at home.

**Virgo : (August 24 - September 22)** A tricky situation will arise all of a sudden. You will be tense about the poor health of your elders or parents. But you will face this situation bravely and come out as a winner. Your friends will support you a lot. You will have a

favorable time in your business. You will have financial gains. You will also spend quality time with your friends and feel rejuvenated. Your health will be in good condition. You will also show love for animals. You will also fulfill your hobbies. Changes according to your expectations will start occurring in your life. You will achieve your targets. You will also give importance to your relatives. They will help you a lot and support you fully.

**Libra : (September 23 - October 23)** Time is very beneficial for you. You will have favorable gains in your business/work. You will be kept busy due to your busy schedule. You also need to take care of your health. You will be able to achieve your targets. You will avoid being involved in any extra work at this point in time. All work will be completed as per your plan. You may also win some awards. You will also take part in any special event. Your efforts will bring good results. You will have peace and joy in family relations. Your mate will be a source of strength. You will get opportunities for making profit. New job/business offers too will come. You will promptly grab them with both hands.

**Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22)** You will achieve something big in your life. Fate will be on your side. Your status in society will grow. Your friends and family members will give you good support. You will enjoy their company. There is also possibility of buying some new items in the house. All efforts and tasks related to children's education will be completed. Students will study with concentration. You will also receive a favorable news. Your time will improve and new opportunities will come up. You will also get an important post. All your held-up work will be completed. You will also focus on your targets and meet them too. Your popularity, name and fame too will also rise.

**Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21)** It is going to be a wonderful week. There is a lot of promotion in your job. Your bosses will be very supportive. You may also begin a new job. Days will bring joy and health. You will get success in every job. People associated with technical jobs will reap more benefits. You will benefit from your inheritance. You will also make contact with new people. Politics may attract you. You will spend your time having fun with your friends and close people. You will achieve success in your business. The whole week is full of happiness. You will have some positive changes in yourself. It will make you feel better and confident. And you will be more assertive and achieve your goals.

**Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20)** Your importance along with your work will increase. Your work conditions will be better, and you will spend time enjoying yourself. You need to be careful about your health. You may mess up your work due to your carelessness. Avoid being overconfident. At work, keep your documents safely so that your enemies cannot harm you in any way. You need to limit your expenses. These are the days that you succeed in government related matters. Your subordinates will fully support you. Peace and harmony will prevail in family relations. You will have good relations with your mate. You will also receive the full support of your parents and in-laws.

**Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18)** The start of the week will be pleasant. You will be happy. These are good days in terms of money. You will also hear some good or pleasant news. Due to your strong will power you will start moving towards the path of success. Your enemies and opponents will not be able to harm you. There will be peace and harmony with people around you. Prepare well for interview/exam. You will be mentally peaceful. These are enlightenment days. You will have the desire to do something new for yourself, for which you will learn a lot of things. This will take you to the road of success and prosperity in life. And you will be getting lot of benefits from others.

**Pisces : (February 19 - March 20)** Your career-related problems will get resolved. Keeping your mutual enemy aside, you will focus on your work. Obstacles will get removed under the guidance of experienced person. Your time will be spent reading interesting and educational literature. Your work efficiency will enhance. You will meet old friends. Your presentation will also be terrific. Time will be in your favor. You will be able to complete all your tasks. You will also do meditation and prayer. Your efforts will be met with success. You will also plan to do something big in your life. Those who are single will get suitable marriage proposals. Your family will give consent and provide you with full support.

# Scientists now worrying about men losing their Y chromosome with age

Men tend to lose the Y chromosome from their cells as they age. But because the Y bears few genes other than for male determination, it was thought this loss would not affect health.

But evidence has mounted over the past few years that when people who have a Y chromosome lose it, the loss is associated with serious diseases throughout the body, contributing to a shorter lifespan.

## Loss of the Y chromosome in older men

New techniques to detect Y chromosome genes show frequent loss of the Y in tissues of older men. The increase with age is clear: 40 per cent of 60-year-old men show loss of Y, but 57 per cent of 90-year-olds. Environmental factors such as smoking and exposure to carcinogens also play a role.

Loss of Y occurs only in some cells, and their descendants never get it back. This creates a mosaic of cells with and without a Y chromosome in the body. Y-less cells grow faster than normal cells in culture, suggesting they may have an advantage in the body — and in tumours.

The Y chromosome is particularly prone to mistakes during cell division — it can be left behind in a little bag of membrane that gets lost. So we would expect that tissues with rapidly dividing cells would suffer more from loss of Y.

## Why should loss of the gene-poor Y matter?

The human Y is an odd little chromosome, bearing only 51 protein-coding genes (not counting multiple copies), compared with the thousands on other chromosomes. It plays crucial roles in sex determination and sperm function, but was not thought to do much else.

The Y chromosome is frequently lost when cells are cultured in the lab.

It is the only chromosome that can be lost without killing the cell. This suggests that no specific functions encoded by Y genes are necessary for cellular growth and function.

Indeed, males of some marsupial species jettison the Y chromosome early in their development, and evolution seems to be rapidly dis-

pensing with it. In mammals, the Y has been degrading for 150 million years and has already been lost and replaced in some rodents.

So the loss of Y in body tissue late in life should surely not be a drama.

## Association of loss of Y with health problems

Despite its apparent uselessness to most cells in the body, evidence is accumulating that loss of Y is associated with severe health conditions, including cardiovascular and neurodegenerative diseases and cancer.

Loss of Y frequency in kidney cells is associated with kidney disease.

Several studies now show a relationship between loss of Y and cardiac disease. For instance, a very large German study found that men over 60 with high frequencies of loss of Y had an increased risk of heart attacks.

Loss of Y has also been linked to death from COVID, which might explain the sex difference in mortality. A tenfold higher frequency of loss of Y has been found in Alzheimer's disease patients.

Several studies have documented associations of loss of Y with various cancers in men. It is also associated with a poorer outcome for those who do have cancer. Loss of Y is common in cancer cells themselves, among other chromosome anomalies.

## Does loss of Y cause disease and mortality in older men?

Figuring out what causes the links between loss of Y and health problems is difficult. They might occur because health problems cause loss of Y, or perhaps a third factor might cause both.

Even strong associations can't prove causation. The association with kidney or heart disease could result from rapid cell division during organ repair, for instance.

Cancer associations might reflect a genetic predisposition for genome instability. Indeed, whole-genome association studies show loss of Y frequency is about one-third genetic, involving 150 identified genes largely involved in cell cycle regulation and cancer susceptibility.

However, one mouse study points to a direct effect. Researchers

transplanted Y-deficient blood cells into irradiated mice, which then displayed increased frequencies of age-related pathologies, including poorer cardiac function and subsequent heart failure.

Similarly, loss of Y from cancer cells seems to affect cell growth and malignancy directly, possibly driving eye melanoma, which is more frequent in men.

## Role of the Y in body cells

The clinical effects of loss of Y suggest the Y chromosome has important functions in body cells. But given how few genes it hosts, how? The male-determining SRY gene found on the Y is expressed widely in the body. But the only effect ascribed to its activity in the brain is complicity in causing Parkinson's disease. And four genes essential for making sperm are active only in the testis.

But among the other 46 genes on the Y, several are widely expressed and have essential functions in gene activity and regulation. Several are known cancer suppressors.

These genes all have copies on the X chromosome, so both males and females have two copies. It may be that the absence of a second copy in Y-less cells causes some kind of dysregulation.

As well as these protein-coding genes, the Y chromosome contains many non-coding genes. These are transcribed into RNA molecules, but never translated into proteins. At least some of these non-coding genes seem to control the function of other genes.

This might explain why the Y chromosome can affect the activity of genes on many other chromosomes.

Loss of Y affects the expression of some genes in the cells that make blood cells, as well as others that regulate immune function. It may also indirectly affect the differentiation of blood cell types and heart function.

The DNA of the human Y was only fully sequenced a couple of years ago, so in time, we may track down how particular genes cause these negative health effects. (*The Conversation*)

(Authored by Jenny Graves, La Trobe University)

# How Victorians sent insulting cards to their unwanted suitors

Many people imagine the Victorians to be the stern "we are not amused" type, yet they had a pretty cruel sense of humour when it came to Valentine's Day.

While today's lovers often exchange cute (and cheesy) cards, the Victorians loved to send insulting "vinegar Valentines".

I first discovered this peculiar practice in 2019, when I designed a small exhibition at The Atkinson arts hub in Southport as part of a larger show about Victorian humour.

Researching the cards was eye-opening and a lot of fun, and I think of them every Valentine's Day when I look at the more sentimental and affectionate fare on sale now.

Posted to unwanted suitors or people one disliked, vinegar Valentines were cheaply produced cards with unflattering images and offensive poems.

These anonymous illustrations and verses were intended to represent the unfortunate recipient and point out their flaws, as well as leaving them guessing who sent it.

The last word in bad romance, these mock valentines were particularly popular in Britain and America from the 1840s onwards. They featured many different types of caricatures.

Some cards focused on the recipient's looks, exaggerating or shrinking facial features to look as unpleasant as possible.

The illustration above depicts a woman with squashed, unappealing features- and the accompanying verse highlighted these flaws.

The rhyme, *A Beauty Beauty*, states



Though nothing more homely e'er walked-on two feet, In your own mind you're everything lovely and sweet, That you're not a heart-breaker's a fact I'd impart. You may break lots of dishes, but nary a heart.

The card lampoons the recipient's presumptions that she is attractive and good-tempered. However, the verse cuts through the supposed good opinion the lady has of herself by asserting that she would never be admired enough to be loved.

The line describing how she "may break lots of dishes, but nary a heart" is the zinger. Not only is the poor woman deemed unattractive, she's clumsy too.

Women were not the only recipient of Valentine's Day hate- men were denigrated if considered to be unappealing flirts.

A common feature of vinegar Valentines was to depict the recipient as an animal. My favourite features a snake in

a blue smoking jacket with a black top hat, and a horrified lady in the background.

The accompanying poem states the man is a "rattle-snake", hence the image, and describes the "bitter" life a lady would lead with the recipient as a spouse. It ends with the cautionary line that a lady would "not accept the ring / Or evermore 'twould prove a sting".

These cards were phenomenally popular and demonstrate what happens when love goes wrong. But how did Victorians actually meet their potential spouses?

**A Victorian version of online dating**

A new method of courtship in the Victorian era was placing a matrimonial advert in a newspaper or periodical. These advertisements were much like a modern-day dating profile, where readers would submit their "bio" to the paper and wait for it to be published.

One paper that regularly featured matrimonial adverts was Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday, an illustrated weekly that focused on the leisure pursuits of the late-19th century. An early version of the comic strip, the Half-Holiday established an enormous readership, reaching 3,40,000 people.

Most stories followed the fictional exploits of idle schemer Ally Sloper, who skulked and sloped about the alleyways of East London in the late 19th century.

The "half-holiday" referred to the half day on a Saturday when people were free to indulge in leisure activities, and which for many coincided with football matches.

The dodgy Sloper was the main recurring character, but the paper also regularly featured his glamorous daughter, a music-hall actress and founder of Tootsie's Matrimonial Agency.

The paper liked to pretend

their fictional characters were a genuine family, and offered real services to their readers.

As the most romantic character, Tootsie Sloper was the natural figurehead for romance-seeking readers.

Hopeful advertisers often described themselves as "fond of fun" and wanted their partners to be "jolly".

Others played with humour in their ads, like the "Two Young Gentlemen" who described themselves to be "not painfully repulsive, but not precisely dangerously handsome".

Despite fears that dating adverts were full of scammers- much like catfishing today- they provided a novel way for partners to meet, and allowed regular readers the fun of speculating about the advertisers.

Victorians were not the perpetually grim-faced, serious bunch that old photographs often make out.

They were fun-loving people who enjoyed playing practical jokes on one another.

Matrimonial adverts allowed Victorian lovers to have more control over how they presented themselves to potential partners, and express their humour for all to see.

Vinegar Valentines were one of many ways the Victorians shared their sense of humour, while rejecting any unwanted attention.

Insulting in nature, these cards were intended to make the recipient feel foolish, much like the jokes found in comic papers at the time.

But spare a thought for the poor souls who received one of these cruel cards before the era of prepaid postage. They had to pay to receive their insults! (*The Conversation*)

## Why do nose, ear hairs become longer and thicker as we age

Growing older often brings unexpected grooming challenges. This is particularly apparent when some areas that, when young, we could otherwise ignore start to develop hair.

This includes our nose and ears, where hair grows thicker and longer as we age. But why do hairs in these areas act like this? The answer predominantly lies in our sex hormones.

### Two types of hair

There are two types of hair that grow across our bodies.

Vellus hair is fine and colourless. This hair (also called, "peach fuzz") grows across most of our bodies, including our arms and neck.

Terminal hair is stiff, thick and darker. It stands up from our skin and is usually very obvious. Adult males have terminal hair on about 90 per cent of their bodies, with females growing it on about 30 per cent of their bodies.

Terminal hair stands up

when we're cold (giving goosebumps) and helps trap heat to keep us warm. It also protects us from the sun (such as hair on our scalp), and keeps dust and dirt out of our eyes through eyebrows and eyelashes.

As vellus hair is smaller, thinner and colourless, it is not usually an aesthetic problem (although it can be altered in some diseases). Instead, it is the terminal hair that is often noticed, and the primary target of our razor.

The normal process of hair development involves a growth phase (anagen), follicle-shrinking phase (catagen), and then a short resting phase (telogen) before the hair falls out and is replaced as the cycle begins again. Some 90 per cent of the hair on our body is in the growth phase at any given time.

Nose, ear, eyelash and eyebrow hairs don't usually grow too long. This is because the growth phase of the follicles only lasts about

100-150 days, meaning there is a limit to how long they can grow.

Alternatively, the hair on your head has a growth phase that lasts several years, so it can grow to more than one meter in length if you don't get it cut.

### What is the effect of ageing?

Androgens are a group of sex hormones that play a key role in puberty, development, and sexual health. The most common androgen is testosterone. These androgens influence hair growth and are the key to understanding why we have longer and thicker hair in our nose and ears.

Hairs in different parts of the body respond to androgens differently. Unlike some hairs that are stimulated at puberty (such as pubic hairs and facial hair in males), some hairs, such as the eyelashes, don't respond at all to androgens. (*The Conversation*)

## Sharda University's festival ends with power-packed performances

**GREATER NOIDA, Feb 15:** The three-day annual cultural fest Chorus 2K26 at Sharda University concluded on a high note with an electrifying live performance by Punjabi pop sensation Sunanda Sharma.

Held under the theme "Festival of Dreams and Diversity," the event brought together students from across India and abroad to celebrate music, art, and culture. Nearly 60 teams from various universities participated in more than 20 competitions, including debates, fashion shows, rap battles, mono acts, comedy performances, open-mic sessions, and group dances.

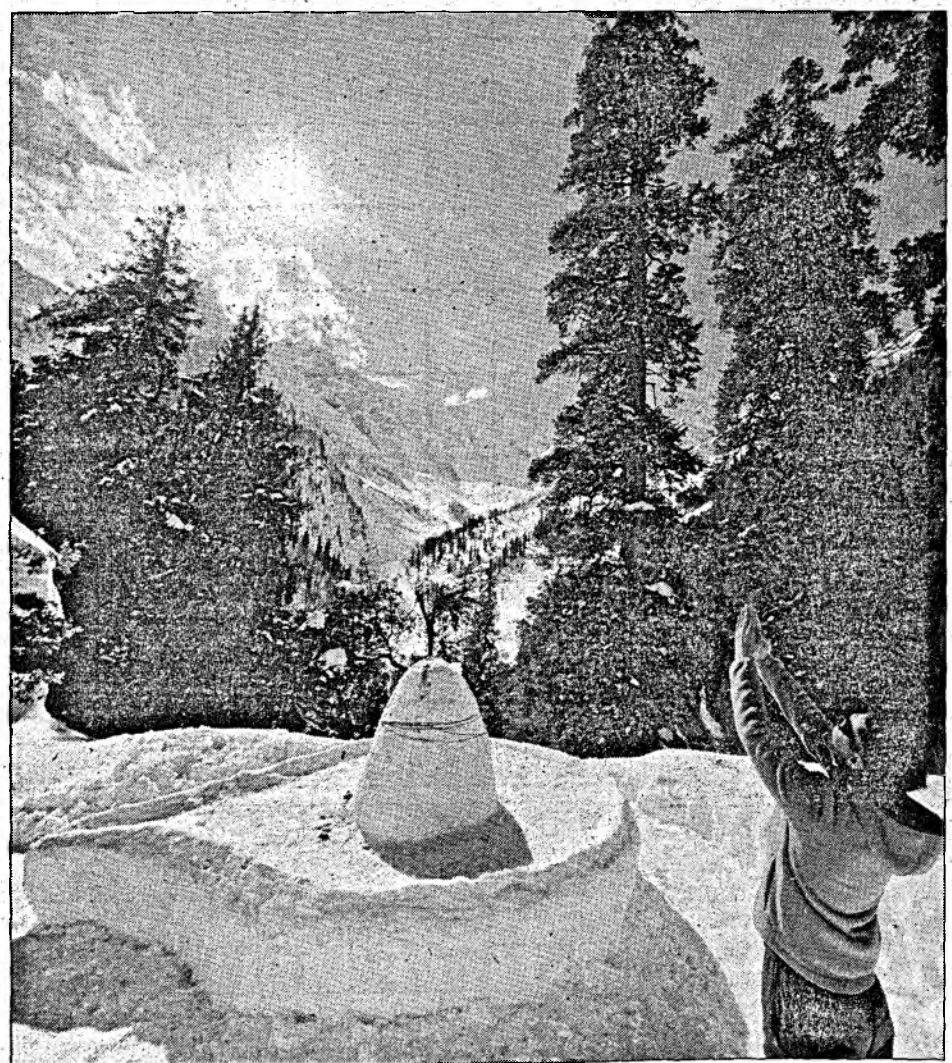
The festival featured high-energy performances by renowned composer duo Salim-Sulaiman, DJ Ravator, and singer Aditi Sharma. The grand finale saw Sunanda Sharma enthral the crowd with hit numbers such as "Jani Tera Na," "Mummy Nu Pasand," "Sandal," and "Morni" as the audience danced and recorded the performances.

A key highlight was the Global Village showcase, where students from over 28 countries and several Indian states presented traditional cuisines and cultural displays, reflecting the university's international diversity. Diplomats from multiple nations were also in attendance.

Dr. Ajit Kumar, Director of Public Relations, said the festival aimed to integrate cultural diversity from across India and the world on a single platform. The event witnessed participation from over 70 dignitaries, faculty members, and students.

Chancellor P.K. Gupta emphasized that such events encourage collaboration, creativity, and leadership among students. Pro-Chancellor Y.K. Gupta distributed awards to competition winners during the closing ceremony.

Chorus 2K26 reaffirmed Sharda University's commitment to fostering global exposure, cultural exchange, and holistic development beyond the classroom. (*Sponsored*)



A man offers prayers with folded hands before an ice Shivlinga prepared by local residents at a snow-covered tourist spot, in Kullu district on Saturday. (PTI)

### Taxi drivers seek skill...

(Contd from P-3) While describing communication training as an immediate and practical remedy to boost tourism, Jyrrwa also highlighted what he termed a necessary long-term policy intervention.

He maintained that restricting vehicles from outside Meghalaya at tourist destinations would protect the interests of local drivers and create a more regulated tourism environment within the state.

Stakeholders present at the meeting underscored the importance of coordinated efforts between the government and tourism service providers to ensure that Meghalaya remains competitive and welcoming amid increasing tourist inflow.

### WJH village comes alive...

(Contd from P-3) down from their ancestors.

He expressed immense joy in witnessing such traditional ritual dances that reflect and preserve the indigenous identity and cultural heritage of the people.

### 3 more held...

(Contd from P-3) was killed after a mob attacked a group of ACHIK members near Goalgaon village. The members were returning in four vehicles after inspecting illegal stone quarries near the Wadagokgre area.

Dilseng and a colleague sustained serious injuries in the attack and were rushed to Tura Civil Hospital, where Dilseng later succumbed to his injuries.

## Govt cheating cotton farmers, textile exporters over tariffs, alleges Rahul

**NEW DELHI, Feb 14:** Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Saturday accused the government of cheating cotton farmers and textile exporters in the country over the India-US interim trade deal and said the agreement is likely to inflict deep damage on both sectors.

He also claimed that the trade deal, which now favours Bangladesh through zero per cent tariffs, will either finish the textile sector or the cotton farming or both, and the entire country knows this.

In a post on X, he said the government has neither protected the interests of cotton farmers nor that of textile exporters as a visionary government would have negotiated a deal that protected both and ensured prosperity

for both the sectors.

"18 per cent Tariff vs 0 per cent - Let me explain how the Prime Minister and his cabinet are spreading confusion on this issue. And how they are cheating India's cotton farmers and textile exporters through the India-US trade deal," he said in his post.

Hitting back at Gandhi, Textile Minister Giriraj Singh accused Rahul Gandhi of spreading "misinformation without understanding the facts".

"The reality is that India has secured a much better and more balanced trade arrangement with the US compared to many of our competing countries - a deal designed holistically to support industry growth while safeguarding the interests of our farmers.

"India's cotton export story is stronger and more diversified than ever," Singh said, adding that it is not dependent on just one market.

In his post, Gandhi said Bangladesh is being given zero per cent tariff benefit on garment exports to the US - the only condition is that they import American cotton.

"After the announcement of 18 percent tariff on Indian garments, when I raised the question in Parliament about the special concession being given to Bangladesh, the reply from a minister of the Modi government was: 'If we also want the same benefit, we will have to import cotton from America'.

"Why was this fact hidden from the country till now? And what kind of policy is

this? Is this really any kind of choice - or is it a trap designed to push us into a 'well in front, ditch behind' situation," he asked.

The Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha said, "If we import American cotton, our own farmers will be ruined. If we don't import it, our textile industry will lag behind and get destroyed." And now, he claimed, Bangladesh is also giving signals that it may reduce or even stop importing cotton from India, he said.

Gandhi said the textile industry and cotton farming are the backbone of livelihood in India, he noted, adding that crores of people's daily bread depend on these very sectors.

Attacking these sectors means pushing millions of families into the pit of un-

employment and economic crisis, Gandhi claimed, adding that India's textile sector provides employment to five crore families and Modi's US deal will destroy the textile sector.

"I call this surrender as it will either kill the textile sector or cotton sector or both," Gandhi also said in a video message.

"A visionary government that thinks in the national interest would have negotiated a deal that protects and ensures the prosperity of both cotton farmers and textile exporters.

"But exactly the opposite has happened - Narendra 'Surrender' Modi and his ministers have made an agreement that is likely to inflict deep damage on both sectors," he said in his post. (PTI)

## Rahul's policy is to lie loudly, repeat it; his factory of lies now identified: Shah

**KARAIKAL (PUDUCHERRY), Feb 14:** Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Saturday asserted that the interests of Indian farmers and fishermen have been fully secured in the recent FTAs and the Indo-US trade deal signed by the country, and slammed top Congress leader Rahul Gandhi for misleading them with "lies" and trying to create an "illusion".

Also, Shah praised Prime Minister Modi's decisive leadership by taking resolute action against terrorism-the surgical strikes after the Pulwama attack, and later Operation Sindoor. He paid Shradhanjali (tributes) to the CRPF jawans who made the supreme sacrifice for the nation.

Launching a scathing attack on the Leader of Oppo-

sition in the Lok Sabha, Shah charged that Gandhi "has started a new tradition of telling lies daily" and asked him to "carefully" go through the fine-print of the recent deals clinched with the UK and EU, besides the US, which has particularly come under sharp attack from the Congress MP.

"Its Rahul Gandhi's policy to lie, lie loudly, repeat it. But people have identified your lie manufacturing factory," he said in his address at a well-attended BJP rally in this poll-bound Union Territory. "Rahul Gandhi wants to mislead the country's fishermen and farmers. He intends to spread illusion by telling lies," Shah charged.

In the Free Trade Agreements signed with the UK and the EU, besides the Indo-US

trade deal, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has ensured "100 per cent protection" for farmers, fishermen and livestock breeders, Shah said.

Asking Gandhi to go through the provisions in the FTAs and the trade deal carefully, Shah reiterated that the interests of the Indian stakeholders have been ensured "100 per cent." Fishermen would benefit from the FTAs.

He charged that farmers' interests were "sold off" during the UPA regime headed by the late Manmohan Singh. "The FTAs and trade deal will not cause any harm to our farmers. The harm to farmers was done during your Manmohan Singh government. Several global agreements were signed back then in which the interests of farmers were sold off.

Here, Narendra Modi ji has ensured the protection of farmers and livestock rearers," he said.

PM Modi has worked to provide 100 per cent protection to farmers, brothers and sisters involved in animal husbandry, and fishermen, Shah stated.

Further, the top BJP leader targeted the previous Puducherry Congress regime led by V Narayanasamy (2016-21) over corruption and cited a recent CAG report and alleged that "the entire development fund of Rs 15,000 crore was swallowed" in the union territory during the grand old party-led government. A probe into the matter has begun and Rs 15,000 crore is "Puducherry's three-year budget." (PTI)

## Sharad Pawar discharged from Pune hospital

**PUNE, Feb 14:** NCP (SP) president Sharad Pawar, who was undergoing treatment for a chest infection at a private hospital here, was discharged from the facility on Saturday afternoon. The 85-year-old Rajya Sabha member left the hospital around 1 pm.

Pawar's daughter and NCP (SP) working president Supriya Sule said he has been advised to rest for three to four days. "Accordingly, he will rest at home and will resume his daily work thereafter," she said in a social media post.

Pawar was brought to Ruby Hall Clinic here earlier this week from his residence in Baramati town, Pune district, after he complained of difficulty in breathing and a persistent cough. (PTI)

"Try to learn something about everything  
and everything about something."

—Thomas Huxley

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 185 SHILLONG, MONDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2026

### BNP signals change

A new political climate is set to develop in Bangladesh with the swearing in of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government there. Party chief Tarique Rahman is expected to step in as Prime Minister on Tuesday. The interim government steered by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus and others would step aside following the parliamentary election verdict that brought back the BNP to centre-stage. In a process that barred the rival Awami League of exiled leader Sheikh Hasina from contesting the elections, the BNP secured around 60 per cent of the vote, while the Jamaat-e-Islami was far behind – securing only 68 seats against the BNP's 209 in a house of 297. Compared to the latter, which seemed to have links with the Pakistani establishment, the BNP is strongly nationalistic. Such a spirit was evident also in the pronouncements of Rahman after his party's landslide win, he having declared that national unity should be Bangladesh's collective strength and that the interests of Bangladesh would determine the next government's foreign policy.

Tarique Rahman represents one of the two principal ruling families of Bangladesh; the BNP having been founded by his father Ziaur Rahman, a military general who led the nation for a period; and mother Khaleda Zia, a former prime minister, who led the party for over 30 years until her death on December 30, 2025. The BNP ran parallel with the Awami League of Sheikh Hasina, who led the nation as prime minister for 15 years till August 2024 under the inspiring memory of her father and Bangladesh's founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The Rahman family's close association with India, which helped in the liberation struggle from what was then East Pakistan, to make it an independent nation in the early 1970s, continues to this day. That was a guarantee to a long era of regional stability too. Hasina, now safely ensconced in Delhi, had been a guarantee against Pakistani machinations in Bangladesh. Yet, the generals in Rawalpindi worked through layers of fundamentalist influences in Bangladesh to seek and hurt India and strengthen anti-India feelings there. They were also believed to have worked from behind the student-led offensives that unseated Sheikh Hasina from power. The interim government advised by Muhammad Yunus, to some extent, played into the hands of both Pakistani and Chinese interest groups. That now is a chapter left behind in history.

When a new chapter begins in Bangladesh's politics, India would keenly watch the unfolding scenario. Issues like the Ganga water treaty and the "patronage or protection" that Hasina gets from Delhi could strain relations between the two nations. Yet, Rahman's stress on national unity, if seen in the right spirit, could mean a phase of reconciliation with his party's main political rival. This is necessary also as it would be in his own interest to keep the Jamaat-e-Islami's fundamentalist streaks under check. Hasina is likely to step aside into retirement and her party could take a hit in the absence of a credible face to lead it from the front. From a positive point of view, India would have to reconcile with the new realities in Bangladesh and do a balancing act.

## Your Degree is Not Your Destiny: Why What You Study Matters Less Than What You Can Do

By Shainam Kharumnuid

Thirty years ago, if you studied engineering, you became an engineer. If you studied medicine, you became a doctor. Your college degree was like a train ticket and it took you to one specific destination, and that was that. Today, that's no longer true. Your degree still matters, but it's no longer the only thing that decides where your career goes. Think of it less like a train ticket and more like a passport. It opens doors, but you choose where to travel.

### Big Names, Surprising Degrees

Some of the world's most successful leaders took career paths nobody would have predicted from their college majors. The CEO of Google, Sundar Pichai, studied Metallurgical Engineering at IIT Kharagpur. The founder of Netflix, Reed Hastings, studied mathematics. Brian Chesky, who created Airbnb (the app that lets people rent out their homes to travelers), studied fine arts. Susan Wojcicki, who ran YouTube for nearly a decade, studied history and literature. These aren't rare exceptions anymore. They represent a growing trend.

### The Pattern Is Everywhere

I studied Electrical Engineering at IIT Madras, one of India's top engineering colleges. Today, my work has nothing to do with electrical circuits. And I'm not unusual since roughly 90% of my classmates ended up in careers unrelated to their degree. One classmate, Arvind Srinivas, went on to start Perplexity, a company building a popular AI-powered search engine. Others became management consultants, investors, and even actors.

At IIM Bangalore, one of India's premier business schools, I met doctors and dentists from top medical colleges who were getting MBAs specifically to leave medicine behind. A senior colleague at my current company, practiced dentistry in Italy for ten years before teaching himself to code and becoming a software engineer. The takeaway? People are successfully reinventing their careers at every stage of life, and the old rules about "sticking to your field" are fading fast.

### What Changed?

In the mid-1990s, if you wanted to learn something advanced, you pretty much had to go to a university. Specialized knowledge lived behind classroom doors. Switching careers was seen as risky, even irresponsible. Your degree was your identity.

The internet changed all of that. Today, platforms like

YouTube, Coursera, and edX offer high-quality courses from world-class universities, often for free. You can learn data analysis, graphic design, business strategy, or programming from your phone. Major companies like Google, Apple, and IBM have dropped the requirement for a college degree for many of their jobs, choosing instead to focus on what candidates can actually do.

### How Artificial Intelligence Is Changing the Game

Here's where things get really interesting. Artificial intelligence, the technology behind tools like ChatGPT and Google's Gemini, is making it possible for people to do things that previously required years of specialized training.

For example, there's a growing practice sometimes called "vibe coding," where people build working apps and websites simply by describing what they want in plain language. Instead of writing complex computer code line by line, you tell an AI tool what you need, and it writes the code for you. Someone who understands what customers want, say, a psychology graduate or a small business owner, can now create a basic app or website without a computer science degree.

This doesn't mean technical knowledge is worthless. It means the bar for getting started has dropped dramatically. What matters more now is clear thinking, good communication, and the ability to solve problems step by step. Skills that aren't tied to any single degree.

### Hiring Is Changing Too

Smart companies are rethinking how they hire. Instead of filtering candidates by which college they attended or what degree they hold, some companies now give candidates a real problem to solve, and then AI tools, and watch how they work.

Can the candidate break a big problem into smaller pieces? Can they clearly explain what they need to an AI assistant? Can they look at the AI's answer and tell whether it's good or needs improvement? These practical skills are becoming more important than the name on your degree.

### The Workplace Is Shifting

Inside companies, something interesting is happening. Junior employees who are comfortable using AI tools are sometimes producing better work than their more experienced colleagues who rely on doing things the

old way. A marketing professional using AI to crunch numbers can now produce insights that used to require a data analyst. A literature graduate using AI research tools can write business reports that rival those from MBA students.

In other words, what you can do is starting to matter more than what your resume says you should be able to do.

### What Should Students Focus On?

1. If degrees alone don't guarantee a career path, what should students invest their time in? Here are the qualities and habits that matter most in today's world:

2. Be a fast learner. The tools and technologies we use change constantly. The ability to pick up new skills quickly, rather than relying only on what you learned in college, is perhaps the most valuable trait you can develop.

3. Show your work. Start a blog, contribute to community projects, take on freelance assignments, or document what you're learning. A portfolio of real work speaks louder than a certificate on the wall. Leverage LinkedIn and Twitter extensively because that is where a plethora of job opportunities exist.

4. Sharpen your people skills. Communication, teamwork, creative thinking, and critical analysis are not going out of style. In fact, knowing how to clearly explain a problem, whether to a colleague or to an AI tool, is becoming one of the most sought-after abilities.

5. Build real relationships. Your professional network, the people you know and who know your work, often matters more than your qualifications on paper. While AI can help polish your resume or prepare for interviews, there's no substitute for genuine human connection. In fact, the biggest gain that I got from IIT Madras and IIM Bangalore was the network rather than the education.

6. Learn across fields. The most valuable professionals today are those who can connect different areas of knowledge. Someone who understands both marketing and data, or both technology and human psychology, can solve problems that specialists in a single field often can't.

7. Get comfortable with AI. You don't need to become a programmer, but understanding how AI tools work, when to use them, and when to trust your own judgment

instead is becoming as important as basic computer skills were twenty years ago. Different AI models are useful for different kinds of tasks.

8. Think like a problem-solver. Whether or not you plan to start a business, the habit of identifying problems, imagining solutions, and testing them out is incredibly valuable. AI tools make it easier than ever to experiment with ideas at low cost.

9. Stay resilient. Careers are no longer straight lines. You may switch industries, learn entirely new skills, or take on roles that don't even exist yet. Being comfortable with uncertainty and willing to adapt is essential.

### College Still Matters, Just Differently

None of this means that going to college is a waste of time. Universities still offer structured learning, valuable networks, professional credibility, and access to certain careers (you still need a medical degree to be a doctor, for instance). But a degree is increasingly just one piece of the puzzle, not the whole picture.

### A Special Opportunity for Northeast India

For students in Northeast India, these changes are particularly promising. When success depends more on how well you think, communicate, and use widely available online tools than on which city you live in or which elite college you attended, geography becomes less of a barrier. The AI revolution could be especially empowering for regions that have traditionally been far from India's major business and technology centers.

### The Bottom Line

The question isn't just "What should I study?" anymore. It's "What can I do, what problems can I solve, and how do I keep learning?"

Your degree is a starting point, not a finish line. What truly matters is your willingness to learn, create, adapt, and grow, throughout your entire career. That path requires more self-direction and grit than simply following a syllabus, but it's also more open, more flexible, and more rewarding than ever before. If you are currently a college student or about to go to college, make sure you start creating a LinkedIn account. Follow relevant people from Silicon Valley on Twitter and LinkedIn and look at what they do. Listen to Lenny's Podcast to understand how the landscape is changing and how you can leverage this opportunity. Or if you are truly interested about AI and the tech career path in general, just reach out to me on LinkedIn and I am open to helping you out as well.

## Illegal Coal Mining: A Hydra Headed Problem

By VK Lyngdoh

The editorial "Congress-less-Assembly session" (ST February 14, 2026) also boldly stated no MLA from Jaintia Hills can win elections if he/she were to take a firm stance on banning illegal coal mining. The editorial further elaborated that even the VPP while campaigning for the Lok Sabha election had stated that coal mining is a traditional livelihood and that the Party would ensure that the ban was lifted by taking the issue up at the right quarters at the level of the central government and by pushing for scientific mining. It attributed the huge electoral margin in the Jaintia Hills Lok Sabha election to the VPP's pro mining stance which reflects a hard political reality.

In Jaintia Hills: coal mining, though banned in its rat-hole form, remains deeply tied to livelihood, local identity and electoral politics. Any MLA who takes a firm stance against illegal coal mining risks alienating a large voter base that depends on coal for income. This creates a political paradox: enforcing the ban is legally and ethically necessary, but politically costly. The Voice of the People Party (VPP) campaigned by acknowledging coal mining as a traditional livelihood. They promised to push for lifting the ban and transitioning to scientific mining through central government channels. This stance resonated with voters, explaining their huge margin of victory in Jaintia Hills.

The underlying dynamics is that coal mining is not just an economic activity; it's woven into social identity and local power structures. Voters often prioritize livelihood security over environmental or legal concerns. Political parties adapt by framing coal mining as a heritage issue rather than a regulatory problem. The editorial is justified in highlighting that political survival in Jaintia Hills is tied to coal mining. It shows that livelihoods hinge on coal, making outright bans unpopular. Parties like VPP succeed by aligning with local sentiment while promising "scientific mining" as a middle path. The governance dilemma is balancing environmental law, safety and livelihood politics which is extremely difficult in this region. This is a classic case of policy vs. politics, while governance demands enforcement of the ban, electoral logic rewards those who promise to preserve coal mining in some form.

The tragic coal mine explosion in East Jaintia Hills that killed more than 30 workers has indeed sparked calls for accountability. The accident occurred in an illegal coal mine in Mynsang-Thangsko, East Jaintia Hills, on February 5, 2026. Over 30 workers, many from poor backgrounds in Meghalaya, Assam and Nepal, lost their lives due to the blast. Rat-hole mining, the method used, has been banned in Meghalaya since 2014, but continues illegally in parts of the state.

The Chief Minister Conrad Sangma condemned the incident and promised stringent action against those responsible. Police have already arrested two people linked to the mine. A Judicial Inquiry Commission has been set up to investigate the mishap and one hopes it is "carried to its ultimate conclusion." Some groups have demanded the CM's resignation, arguing that the persistence of illegal mining reflects governance failure. However, the state BJP spokesperson has rightly rejected these demands, saying it is fair to wait for the inquiry's findings before assigning responsibility and so has the Health Minister.

Those who argue for resignation of the Chief Minister are of the view that deaths highlight systemic failure to enforce the mining ban and therefore as head of the state, the CM bears ultimate responsibility for governance lapses. Those who argue against resignation are of the view that investigations are ongoing, and arrests have been made and premature resignation could disrupt governance before accountability is clearly established. In Indian political practice, resignation demands often arise after major tragedies, but whether they are justified depends on whether investigations prove administrative negligence or complicity. Right now, the official stance is to await the inquiry's outcome.

Let no person be fooled. Rat-hole mining persists in Meghalaya despite the government's push for "scientific mining" because of a mix of economic, institutional, and enforcement gaps. Why does rat-hole mining continue? Firstly, it has economic incentives – low investment, high profit and rat-hole mining requires minimal equipment and offers quick returns, making it attractive for local operators. Thousands of workers, including migrants from Assam and Nepal rely on these mines for survival. The scale of operation as per reports indicate over 22,000 illegal mines that openly operate in Meghalaya, despite the ban.

Secondly, the National Green Tribunal banned rat-hole mining in 2014, but enforcement has been patchy. Then there is local complicity where district-level officials often lack resources or face pressure from powerful coal interests and recurring accidents exposes the same enforcement failures. Thirdly, the slow transition to scientific mining is due to requirement for clearances, environmental safeguards and modern technology. While the government is framing policies for scientific mining, implementation is slow compared to the entrenched rat-hole system. Many small mine owners resist scientific methods because it demands higher investment and compliance. Fourthly, the institutional complexity in Meghalaya's tribal governance structure (Sixth Schedule autonomy) complicates regulation, as local councils have significant say in resource use followed by fragmented accountability where multiple agencies (State, District Council, traditional institutions) share responsibility, creating loopholes.

At the end of the day rat-hole mining is cheap, fast, dangerous and ecologically destructive. Whereas scientific mining is safer, regulated but slower to implement and less profitable in the short term. The reality is economic desperation = weak enforcement = persistence of rat-hole mining despite official bans. This shows that rat-hole mining persists not because scientific mining is not planned, but because illegal mining fills the economic vacuum faster than regulated alternatives can be deployed.

Since barking dogs seldom bite, I would prefer to wait and watch what will be discussed in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly by our honourable MLAs between February 16-27, 2026 on this issue plus other relevant issues and let's see if they come forward with practical solutions to the problem that flourished since the 1970s for which late Professor GG Swell who was instrumental as an MP in securing exemption from national mining laws regretted that he had enabled it as he did not find rejected these demands, saying it is fair to wait for the inquiry's findings before assigning responsibility and so has the Health Minister. Those who argue for resignation of the Chief Minister are of the view that deaths highlight systemic failure to enforce the mining ban and therefore as head of the state, the CM bears ultimate responsibility for governance lapses. Those who argue against resignation are of the view that investigations are ongoing, and arrests have been made and premature resignation could disrupt governance before accountability is clearly established. In Indian political practice, resignation demands often arise after major tragedies, but whether they are justified depends on whether investigations prove administrative negligence or complicity. Right now, the official stance is to await the inquiry's outcome.

Rat hole mining is therefore a hydra-headed problem where politicians are damned if they insist on banning it and damned if they persist in allowing it to happen as a subterranean activity.

### Letters to the Editor

### Resurrected from the Ashes: A Miner's Miraculous Mix-Up

Editor,  
The report, about the Meghalaya mine worker who returned home alive after his own cremation in Assam's Sribhumi is truly a story that has me questioning: if we've stumbled into a Bollywood script or a zombie apocalypse rehearsal. As a resident of Meghalaya (hello from Shillong, where the hills are alive, but apparently not as alive as Shyambabu Sinha), I couldn't help but chuckle at this macabre mix-up.

Picture this: Poor Shyambabu, presumed dead in that February 5 explosion at Thangskai in East Jaintia Hills, gets a full send-off with mourning, cremation, and the works. His family consigns what they think is him to the flames, only for the man himself to knock on the door three days later like, "Honey, I'm home – and not extra crispy!" Authorities are now "scrambling" to figure out whose body they handed over? Scrambling? That's egg-cellent detective work; perhaps they should check if it was the mine's resident ghost or a body double from a low-budget thriller.

This isn't just a case of mistaken identity; it's a resurrection worthy of Lord Shiva himself – the ultimate god of destruction and, apparently, dramatic comebacks. One can only imagine the family's reaction: "We burned you!

How are you not toast?" And Shyambabu: "Must've been my day off from the afterlife." Kudos to him for turning a tragedy into the ultimate "not dead yet," prank. But seriously, folks, if this doesn't highlight the perils of rat-hole mining and the need for better identification protocols (DNA tests, before pyres, anyone?), I don't know what does. In the spirit of hilarity amid horror, let's raise a toast (non-flammable, please) to Shyambabu's second life. May his story inspire safer mines and fewer fiery faux pas. And to the mystery corpse: Rest in peace, whoever you are – you've got quite the plot twist in your obituary.

Yours etc., (In bewildered amusement, a still-alive reader from Meghalaya)

Yours etc.,  
Anil Thapa,  
Via email

### Heartless Defence Authorities

Editor,  
It is truly disheartening that the Defence authorities have rejected the Meghalaya Government's proposal to construct a flyover from Riibong to Barik, citing security reasons. This particular stretch of road is a nightmare for ordinary commuters who are forced to endure traffic congestion on a daily basis. For the higher echelons of society and military personnel, however, movement restrictions, "no entry" signs, and "no right turn" rules hardly seem to pose any inconvenience. They are protected from the everyday struggles of the common people, for whom being

trapped in traffic is not just an occasional inconvenience but a persistent ordeal.

Being caught in traffic jams is not a new experience for regular commuters, but familiarity does not diminish frustration or the urgent need for relief. The presence of defence land in the heart of the city, acting as a stumbling block to urban development, appears increasingly unreasonable in a rapidly growing urban centre like Shillong. While the government is reportedly exploring alternative routes and identifying viable land to ease traffic congestion, such delays and detours only prolong the suffering of the public. The needs of ordinary citizens, who contribute to the city's economy and social life, must be prioritised in any development agenda.

Moreover, one fails to comprehend the intensity of the security concerns associated with the construction of a flyover. If security were the overriding issue, then road widening should be viewed with similar apprehension. Yet, widening roads is essential to decongest traffic. With the number of vehicles on the road increasing by the day, it is imperative that urban infrastructure be upgraded to accommodate the growing pressure on the city's limited road network.

The outright rejection of the flyover proposal by the Defence authorities also raises concerns about their willingness to part with any land for a four-lane road along the same alignment. Such an inflexible stand could hinder not only traffic solutions but also other

urban development initiatives in the future. While national security is undeniably important, it should not obstruct civic progress. A balanced, consultative approach that considers both security requirements and public welfare is the need of the hour. A city that does not address the needs of its people will not progress.

Yours etc.,  
Jennifer Dkhar,  
Via email

### Advancing Equity for Marginalised Communities

Editor,  
The recent UGC regulation, though currently stayed by the Supreme Court, has sparked an important national debate on advancing equity for marginalised communities. It has also shown that limiting affirmative action only to educational institutions is inadequate. Without broader equity measures across society, prejudices and discriminatory attitudes will persist in general category students long after they leave campus. Affirmative action must therefore be extended into every other domain of public life to achieve lasting social justice.

While laws such as the SC/ST Act provide essential safeguards, they cannot fully address the discrimination faced by marginalised groups. The Government has introduced commendable initiatives such as exclusive hostels, entrepreneurship hubs, free coaching, fee waivers, scholarships, and reservations in education and public employment for

SC/ST/OBC students. However, similar transformative interventions must expand into other sectors as well to ensure holistic upliftment.

In this context, the Government must consider establishing premier institutions on the lines of IITs, NITs, and IIMs, staffed and managed exclusively by and for SC/ST/OBC individuals. At least one medical college in every state could also be established under the same model to strengthen representation in healthcare. These institutions would not only provide education but also cultivate intellectual leadership among historically disadvantaged groups. By ensuring representation of SC/ST/OBC students, teachers, researchers, and administrators, they could become national centres of excellence rooted in social justice. Such moves would not violate any of our cherished constitutional principles but would be equivalent in spirit to reserved legislative seats and dedicated SC/ST political cells, which are core features of our society.

Beyond education, affirmative initiatives should also be explored in strategic sectors such as aviation. A public sector aviation enterprise with exclusive participation of pilots, engineers, staff, and management professionals from SC/ST/OBC communities could become a powerful symbol of mobility and inclusion. Representation in such high visibility professions would further challenge entrenched biases and inspire future generations.

Sports is another frontier where discrimination remains widespread. Players from re-

served categories often face bias in selection due to the absence of strong safeguards. Cricket, given its cultural influence, may be an obvious starting point for correction. Proportionate reservations in India's famed national and regional squads would uplift SC/ST/OBC players, build confidence among marginalised communities, and drive broader social change.

Finally, the higher judiciary remains one of the most important yet exclusionary pillars of Indian democracy, with no affirmative policy to ensure representation of SC, ST, and OBC communities. Only a handful from these backgrounds have entered the upper judiciary, often through extraordinary resilience. This imbalance needs to be corrected through immediate legislation to introduce affirmative measures, ensuring justice is not only delivered fairly but also symbolically strengthened through an inclusive bench.

Thus, a comprehensive approach combining legal safeguards, institutional reform, representation, and awareness across all sectors is essential to achieve equity, dignity, and inclusive development. This vision aligns with the constitutional mandate of substantive equality and is the clear path forward for India as a society and a nation.

Yours etc.,  
NK Kehar,  
Shillong-3

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*"To the mind that is still, the whole universe surrenders."*

— Lao Tzu

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No.186 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2026

### Media under fire over Epstein

A senior journalist-anchor of the Adani owned NDTV has come in for harsh criticism from a section of the media fraternity for being an apologist for Jeffrey Epstein the self-confessed sex offender, and paedophile who died in custody. Several opinion pieces and podcasts by senior media persons and columnists have castigated the anchor and the channel for defending and downplaying Epstein while holding TV discussions. Media critics have argued that some mainstream Indian TV channels and anchors have framed discussions about Epstein in a way that seemed to justify or soften his crimes by emphasizing his "professional" role as a financier or power-broker, thereby separating him from his well-documented history as a convicted sex offender and trafficker. The TV anchor in question, while acknowledging Epstein's paedophilia, tried to steer the discussion towards his role as a connector of elites rather than condemning his abusive conduct outright. Naturally this has been interpreted as evidence of a media unwilling to or unable to hold powerful figures and their networks to account.

This also brings into focus the broader issues within the Indian media today where TV debates held evening after evening have panelists supporting the present government being given more space to air their views while voices of dissonance are silenced or not given adequate time to frame their statements. This has been evidenced since 2014 when the Modi-led NDA Government assumed power. Several media channels today are reluctant to probe deeply into powerful figures mentioned in the files or to challenge political narratives. The most controversial one being the emails exchanged between Hardeep Singh Puri the present Petroleum Minister and Epstein at a time when Puri was a member of the US-based International Peace Institute (IPI). The emails which are now gone viral show a familiarity between Epstein and Puri. Naturally this outflow from the Epstein files released in instalments have singled a number of people the world over including important politicians who have since resigned their posts. But in India there are no such examples of politicians resigning on account of violation of moral and ethical principles, least of all to own up to a fault. Politicians remain belligerent and defensive about their acts of omission and commission. It is the media that must discharge its role of exposing such falls from grace by the high and mighty. But when the media instead tries to defend them then it has forfeited its role as the fourth pillar of democracy.

The Epstein Files released by the US Department of Justice include millions of documents — emails, images, videos and records related to his activities, networks and contacts including Anil Ambani. Epstein died in custody in 2019 while awaiting trial on federal sex-trafficking charges. There is no knowing as to who else from India will find their names in the files which are being released in instalments. While Hardeep Singh Puri has claimed that his only communication with Epstein was to assist businesses in India, the fact that he would seek the help of a known paedophile and sex offender is morally untenable. That is what the media ought to focus on instead of defending Puri by actually downplaying Epstein's crimes.

#### Letters to the Editor

### Same Script & Blatant Lies

Editor,  
Here we are living by the same script yet again - illegal mining claiming more lives of voiceless, poor labourers in illegal mines owned by the "High Level" and the same "High Level" controlled government mouthing the same old blatant lies to defend its failures.

Of the many blatant lies the government uses in trying to pull the wool over our eyes is the explanation that "the mining was taking place in remote areas involving 3-4 hours walk away from the nearest villages" which make it hard for authorities to detect any illegalities. Basic common sense tells us that illegal coal wherever it may be extracted needs markets and to reach such markets it needs to be transported by trucks that pass through state roads and national highways where there are several check-gates manned by the police and other authorities. Hence, if the police and other relevant authorities do their duties supply could be choked and stopped at these points and without markets, illegal mining would stop automatically. It may also be added that there is no need to use high-tech means like drones or satellites to detect illegal coal mining. Conventional methods if carried out with honesty would be enough. Having said this, as the trust level on all state authorities including the police has vanished, there is a need for central govern-

ment intervention including the deployment of central police forces to man all the roads leading to coal markets as had similarly happened in Karnataka several years ago where illegal iron ore mining was stopped after the central government intervened.

Another blatant lie of the government and spokesmen of the "High Level" is that coal mining, illegal or otherwise supports the livelihoods of thousands of locals. However, what we see is that whenever coal mining tragedies occur, those who lose their lives or get injured are always the non-local labourers which indicate that there are few, if any locals who are engaged in the dangerous rat hole mining. Besides labourers, we also know that coal mine supervisors and business managers are mostly non-locals. So which locals benefit from coal mining? The answer is common public knowledge - the High level coal mine owners who finance their opulent lifestyles at the expense of human life and the environment which is being demolished day by day.

Hence a simple analysis would explain that coal mining has been responsible for the loss of innumerable livelihoods. Acid laden rivers poison agricultural land and fish sanctuaries downstream thereby snatching the age-old livelihoods of thousands of farmers and fishermen throwing them into poverty. But these people are voiceless and very few know about their struggles.

The forthcoming session of the Assembly is at hand and as always, this session

When the hill state was created, it was given a very beautiful name. 'Meghalaya' meaning 'Abode of Clouds' in Sanskrit, derived from megha (cloud) and alaya (abode). It is a fitting name for a state known for its heavy rainfall, misty hills, and lush greenery. Coined by geographer S.P. Chatterjee, the name was adopted in 1972 and reflects the region's famously close clouds and rich natural beauty of the three hilly regions. However, after the state has attained fifty years of statehood, it has now become famous for all the wrong things. This merits that we revisit and perhaps even change the name of the State from Meghalaya to a new name.

#### Court Order Circumvented in the State

A friend who visited the state recently was curious about the popular "shop open" or "open shop" signposts everywhere he went in Meghalaya. He asked, "This 'shop open' or 'open shop' must be a very popular brand in the state? I have never seen this brand anywhere in India. It must be a business unique to Meghalaya only?" The "shop open/open shop" signs are seen on the roadside almost everywhere in the state. The owner must be very rich to own such a big franchise. So our friend couldn't help but wonder who owns this brand.

"Another strange phenomenon about this business venture is the fact that a person can only see the signs on the roadside, but not the shop. Nowhere do they display their products. What do they sell in these strange shops?" my friend asked. Unfortunately, I did not have answers to any of his questions at that point in time.

I scratched the surface a little and realized that whoever came up with the idea was a genius, and the government should award him/her the "Master of Hoodwink" award of the state. Not surprisingly every business must have its own business secret, but the secrecy of this business is to intentionally deceive the public and even the honourable High Court. Since the same idea has been replicated all over the state, it must be the idea of a bright government official, and the award should go to somebody in the Excise Department of Meghalaya who came up with this brilliant idea.

The Excise Department gets away with fooling ev-

erybody when it tries to circumvent the court order which banned opening or establishing shops selling Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL) on the roadside, near educational institutions, or places of worship. The wine stores remain in the same place albeit with a mischievous sign post which is in violation of court orders. No doubt the general name has replaced the fancy names of wine stores, like 'Wut wut wine store', 'Pynbha briew wine store' or what have you, but it is a case where businessmen, supported by the government, have successfully pulled the wool over everybody's eyes. This is just one case of illegality thriving in the state of Meghalaya, where even court orders are circumvented by stakeholders.

**Court Orders Ignored**  
There are other cases where court orders are outwitted or ignored by the agencies which are supposed to enforce them. One court order being violated with impunity is the timber ban of 1996. Then there is the court order which bans the construction of any structures near rivers or water bodies in the state. If construction near rivers is happening even in towns and cities despite the ban, then God only knows who will enforce the order in the villages.

**Who Will Guard the Guard?**  
When the first woman Director General of Police of the state took charge to lead the Department, she promised to stop the police from collecting money from trucks plying on the highway. Everybody welcomed the announcement, but unfortunately, today we see the police continuing with business as usual. A drive during the night from Guwahati to Silchar will make one realize the number of stops that trucks make while plying on this little less than 300 km highway.

Overloaded dumper trucks transporting boulders and limestone from the Jaintia Hills not only travel with overloaded consignments, but the owners have even extended the bodies of the trucks as they wish. Anybody who travels on the highway to Guwahati would have seen these overloaded dumper trucks carrying different consignments, yet the powers that be are turning a blind eye to what is happen-

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ing. The question is: what are the police, who man these checkpoints on the highway, doing?

**The NGT Ban on Coal Mining**  
After the NGT ban on rat-hole coal mining in April 2014, the illegal activity stopped for a very brief period only. Illegal extraction of coal continued in far-flung areas of the state. The NGT ban also required that the authorities estimate the extracted coal, which was later said to be auctioned by Coal India Limited. Then there was the story of floodwaters due to torrential rains allegedly carrying a total of 4,000 metric tonnes of extracted coal to Bangladesh. Although mining activity is not as visible as it used to be, one can still see trucks carrying coal plying on the highway. At times, some of these trucks overturn and expose the consignments, they carry, yet nobody asks questions. The cement industries too have never complained about the non-availability of coal despite the ban. Naturally, any person in their right frame of mind should ask: where does the coal used in the cement plants come from?

The Good Book says: truth shall prevail. The unlawful acts come to the fore only when accidents occur and people die in incidents which the authorities cannot cover up. My friends from different parts of the world expressed their sympathy when they saw the news reported in media outlets in their countries. The district administration would have been able to save the government from major global embarrassment had it not tried to hide the first incident which occurred a few weeks before the major one. The district administration, and the police department in particular, despite the fact that the victims of the earlier explosive incident were first taken to Sutnga PHC, tried to cover up the incident, which only led to the devastating blast.

**The Chief Minister 'Said' by not 'Saying' it**  
The Chief Minister, time and again in his statements to the press, reiterated that there is no coal mining in the state. By denying the obvious, he is encouraging the illegal activity to continue. The Chief Minister not only denied the fact that coal min-

ing continues despite the ban, he even encouraged mining when he later admitted to the press that it is difficult to regulate illegal coal mining in the state. After the Chief Minister admitted the government's inability to curb illegal mining, incidents of mining increased manifold in Meghalaya. The CM's admission is like the government circuitously giving a green light, and the miners went gung-ho about their business. It is like the government surrendering and, in an indiscreet way, encouraging mining in the state. The Deputy Chief Minister's recent statements that it is difficult to regulate illegal coal mining because mining is happening in far-flung areas where it is difficult to reach even by four-wheel vehicles are just excuses. The coal miners use the highway to transport their consignments, right? If the government is serious about regulating the illegal extraction of coal, it can easily catch the trucks carrying illegal consignments on the highway. Yet, despite the numerous police checkpoints both legal and illegal and on the entire stretch of the highway, somehow coal-laden trucks are still able to go scot-free.

Drones are being used for different purposes, so why can it not use drones to locate coal mining areas? The other pertinent question is how is it that explosives are available freely in the coal mine areas? Who supplied the dynamites to the coal mine owners? The truth is that the government is deliberately turning a Nelson's eye to all the illegal activities happening in the state. There is no power in the world that will be able to force a government that is hell-bent on allowing free rein of illegal acts, to enforce the law.

In such a situation, there is only one thing left for the people of the state to do, and that is to change the name of the state. Because of the rampant illegal activities, the name of the state may change to Illegality or Unlawfulaya. Better still, one may go back to Sanskrit and get the literal meaning of the word "illegal" in Sanskrit. I tried Googling a relevant word and found this word: Avaidha (अविद्या), which means not conforming to law, rule, or Shashtra (scriptures). The question therefore is whether we should now change the name of the state from Meghalaya to Avaidhalaya?

intervention and strong community participation. According to periodic assessments by the Forest Survey of India, Meghalaya has experienced fluctuations in forest cover over the years. Although the total forest area remains relatively high compared to other states, there has been a reduction in very dense forest zones. Forest fragmentation is increasing, which affects wildlife corridors and biodiversity. When forests become fragmented, ecosystems weaken, species migration becomes difficult, and the land becomes more vulnerable to erosion and landslides—particularly during Meghalaya's heavy monsoon season. One of the major causes of forest degradation in Meghalaya is unscientific coal mining, particularly the practice known as rat-hole mining. Despite regulatory efforts by the National Green Tribunal, illegal mining has continued in certain areas. This form of mining leads to large-scale deforestation, soil destruction, and water pollution through acid mine

seasonal water shortages due to damaged catchment areas. Ecotourism, which depends on pristine landscapes, may also suffer if degradation continues. However, solutions are within reach. Strengthening community-led forest management is essential. Traditional institutions such as Dorbar Shnong and Autonomous District Councils can collaborate with environmental scientists to regulate forest use and promote agro-forestry. Strict enforcement against illegal mining, combined with scientific mining practices where permitted, must be ensured. Reforestation programs should prioritize native species rather than monoculture plantations, restoring biodiversity and soil health. Additionally, promoting alternative livelihoods such as eco-tourism, bamboo industries, organic farming, and medicinal plant cultivation can reduce dependence on extractive activities. Urban planning reforms, including protection of water catchment

drainage. Rivers and streams in mining belts have suffered severe contamination, affecting agriculture and drinking water sources. Mining not only removes trees but permanently alters the ecological structure of the land. Another contributing factor is shifting cultivation, locally known as jhum. Traditionally practiced by tribal communities, jhum cultivation once allowed land to regenerate through long fallow cycles. However, due to increasing population pressure and reduced land availability, fallow periods have shortened. As a result, the soil does not fully recover before being cultivated again, leading to reduced fertility and forest degradation. While jhum is culturally significant, its modern adaptation requires scientific modification to ensure sustainability.

Urban expansion is also impacting Meghalaya's greenery. The growth of towns, especially Shillong, has led to hill cutting, construction on forest land, and increasing demand for timber and building materials. Inadequate urban planning has further strained natural resources. As concrete structures replace green spaces, natural water absorption declines, increasing the risk of

flash floods and water shortages during dry periods.

An important structural challenge in Meghalaya is that most land is community-owned. While this system preserves indigenous rights and traditional governance, it sometimes results in weak enforcement of environmental regulations. Without clear accountability and scientific land-use planning, forest areas can be commercially exploited without long-term ecological safeguards.

The consequences of continued forest loss are serious. Meghalaya could face increased landslides, soil erosion, and biodiversity loss. Despite receiving some of the highest rainfall in the world, parts of the state already experience

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## Does anyone care about Meghalaya's dwindling forest cover?

By Danny K Rajee

Meghalaya, known as the "Abode of Clouds," has long been celebrated for its dense forests, rolling green hills, sacred groves, and extraordinary biodiversity. The state enjoys one of the highest forest cover percentages in the country. Yet beneath this green image lies a growing environmental concern: Meghalaya is gradually losing its dense forest cover and ecological stability. While the state still appears lush, the quality, density, and health of its forests are declining in several regions. Between 2021 and 2023, the state lost about 84.07 square kilometres of forest cover, according to the latest India State of Forest Report (ISFR). Addressing this issue requires both scientific

intervention and strong community participation. According to periodic assessments by the Forest Survey of India, Meghalaya has experienced fluctuations in forest cover over the years. Although the total forest area remains relatively high compared to other states, there has been a reduction in very dense forest zones. Forest fragmentation is increasing, which affects wildlife corridors and biodiversity. When forests become fragmented, ecosystems weaken, species migration becomes difficult, and the land becomes more vulnerable to erosion and landslides—particularly during Meghalaya's heavy monsoon season. One of the major causes of forest degradation in Meghalaya is unscientific coal mining, particularly the practice known as rat-hole mining. Despite regulatory efforts by the National Green Tribunal, illegal mining has continued in certain areas. This form of mining leads to large-scale deforestation, soil destruction, and water pollution through acid mine

seasonal water shortages due to damaged catchment areas. Ecotourism, which depends on pristine landscapes, may also suffer if degradation continues. However, solutions are within reach. Strengthening community-led forest management is essential. Traditional institutions such as Dorbar Shnong and Autonomous District Councils can collaborate with environmental scientists to regulate forest use and promote agro-forestry. Strict enforcement against illegal mining, combined with scientific mining practices where permitted, must be ensured. Reforestation programs should prioritize native species rather than monoculture plantations, restoring biodiversity and soil health. Additionally, promoting alternative livelihoods such as eco-tourism, bamboo industries, organic farming, and medicinal plant cultivation can reduce dependence on extractive activities. Urban planning reforms, including protection of water catchment

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Yours etc.,  
Sunrise Poham,  
Via email

### Living with the Absurd

Editor,  
Waking up every morning feels like pretending everything is fine, while deep down I know it is not. Only a few days ago, we

Yours etc.,  
Samuel Swett,  
Shillong - 2

*"Success is the sum of small efforts, repeated day in and day out."*

— Robert Collier

## The Shillong Times

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### Big deals, worries

THIS for India is a time for big deals with mighty nations. France's president Emmanuel Macron is on a visit here that would likely see discussions or even the signing of a pact for sale of 114 Rafale fighter jets, worth \$35 billion — billed as India's largest-ever defence deal. The price and other modalities are yet to be finalized. Alongside, under a pact with the United States, India commits itself to purchase American products worth \$500 billion, spanning sectors like fuel, IT, jets, coal, etc. There are apprehensions that President Trump has forced conditions on India to sign the trade deal — after his massive hike in tariffs on Indian items imported to the US, and then a strategic reduction of the tariffs to 18 per cent. In doing so, he also sought to double India's imports from the US. The Modi government is yet to provide clarifications to some issues raised by the Opposition in Parliament. Certain matters need to be kept confidential, but using this argument as a shield to hide information from Parliament is unacceptable. Fears are also that the agriculture sector would be opened for market invasion by the US. Farmers' interests could be affected. The government is duty-bound to protect national interests in such sweeping, big-scale agreements.

India has been engaging the French jet manufacturer Dassault Aviation for the past 15 years, starting with the UPA-II period. Both regional and global scenarios require us to further boost our defence capabilities. The US under Trump has begun acting on the global scene like a bull in a china shop. Americans have again started browbeating nations near and far. India is faced with constant irritants from both China and Pakistan — and the Operation Sindoor showed how Pakistan was well-equipped with Chinese defence systems. It brought down an Indian fighter jet, a Rafale, or more with use of Chinese fighter jets. India used to be heavily dependent on Russia for its defence requirements ever since the time of Jawaharlal Nehru. In recent times, India started looking beyond Russia and signed deals for Rafale jets in 2012. This was part of a strategic realignment plan also as Russia had failed to catch up with the times in defence upgradation, especially after the disintegration of the USSR and end of the Cold War era.

Notably, some 36 Rafales were purchased in stages since 2016 and 26 more signed for the Navy in 2024. India meanwhile built its own fighter jet, Tejas, that operates with lesser might. In a recent defence deal with the US, India agreed to purchase six Boeing P-8 Poseidon reconnaissance aircraft. Production and deliveries in such deals take time, but all these are bound to strengthen the nation's military might in due course of time, possibly in the 2030s. We are as yet nowhere closer to China, which claims five times India's defence might — due mainly to high-pitched pushes there since the turn of the century and complacency at the political leadership level here. China created huge wealth and reserved a part for its military progression. Here, the UPA-II slept through such scenarios. For Modi too, it took years to act decisively on this front. Better late than never!

# To Unite and Slow Down: Time among the Niamtre

By Anna Notsu

Time is often treated as a neutral backdrop to social life—something that moves evenly and 'naturally' while people act within it. But as I spent time among the Niamtre of Shangpung village in the West Jaintia Hills, I began to understand time differently. Here, time does not simply pass. It gathers people, stretches encounters and quietly produces forms of belonging. Community is not something one automatically belongs to; it is something enacted through shared rhythms of time. By attending to how time is lived—rather than merely measured—we can see how people come together, slow down and recognise one another in ordinary yet meaningful ways.

The last market day of Shangpung in January fell on the 30th, two days before the day of Lum Sohpetbneng. That afternoon, for the first time, I made my way to law Muchai alone without my sisters' familiar company. For the first time, too, I felt lonely in a place I thought I knew well—surrounded by a crowd whose members already seemed assured of one another's presence. The market, usually intimate and predictable, suddenly felt distant. Without the familiar rhythm of walking, stopping and greeting alongside my Shangpung sisters, I felt momentarily out of step.

This feeling did not last long. Familiar faces emerged from the crowd, and with them a familiar weekly greeting: "Lait iaw?"—literally, "Are you going to the market?" Even when one is already there, the question functions less as an inquiry than as a social gesture, a way of acknowledging presence and shared routine. After several such exchanges, almost everyone followed it with the same question: "Are you going to Lum Sohpetbneng?" In Shangpung that week, the pilgrimage had already begun shaping conversation, preparation and anticipation. The market was not just a place of buying and selling, but a space where future movement was collectively imagined.

Both a sacred point on Earth and a reminder of divine connection, Lum Sohpetbneng, the Navel of the Heavens, is more than a site of Khasi origin mythology. It marks the place where heaven and earth were once connected through a golden ladder, now invisible to human sight. The pilgrimage to the altar, now systematised by the Seng Khasi (Kmie) and held on the first Sunday of February, produces a remarkable choreography of communal movement across Khasi-Jaintia Hills each year. People travel from different villages and districts, often in groups, marking the landscape with a common direction. This year, with the help of my companions in Shang-

pung, I joined this collective spiritual migration.

On 1 February, the day of Lum Sohpetbneng, I woke up at 3 a.m., a moment that felt indistinguishable from the night before, as though sleep had folded time rather than moved it forward. Thick misty air stood before us like a wall, reflecting our headlights back at us. As darkness slowly yielded to a distant sunrise, we found ourselves among several cars, each packed with family members heading to the same destination. A small yellow flag fluttered at the front of our car—an expression of Niamtre faith. Crossing into the Khasi Hills, the number of such cars increased. Red-and-white flags bearing the cock, the Seng Khasi symbol, began to appear

village news, from jokes to quiet complaints. The market ceases to be labyrinthine. It becomes a network of relationships, sustained through repeated encounters, familiarity and waiting.

It is tempting to describe this through the language of "community," a word often used to denote belonging or social cohesion. Yet the term is frequently flattened into a shortcut, grouping people along ethnic, linguistic or religious lines. In many developmental programmes, "community" also implies speed, efficiency and constant productivity. At law Muchai, however, time is allowed to linger. What I encountered instead was community enacted through time: through the slowness of market days, the cyclical

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everywhere.

It was in these fleeting exchanges—reassuring glances between Niamtre and Seng Khasi pilgrims moving rapidly through stubborn fog—that I began to feel myself folded into a wider community. Belonging emerged not through shared belief alone, but through direction and the experience of moving together.

This sensation echoed my time at law Muchai. Once every eight days, the market comes alive. Stalls fill with seasonal vegetables, meat, fruit and piles of second-hand clothing that seem to have arrived from far-off places. Each compartment has its dedicated shopkeeper—on the phone, sipping tea or simply awaiting familiar visitors. After days of demanding work, both at home and beyond it, the market gathers villagers back together, not just spatially but temporally.

Markets I know outside India often produce urgency: vendors shouting, hurried footsteps, bodies weaving through narrow aisles, arms constantly reaching for desired goods. Purpose dictates speed. At law Muchai, by contrast, time stretches. People come not merely to buy but to linger. Even after groceries are ticked off the list, customers sit on the concrete edges of stalls—sometimes pulling up a stool inside—talking to vendors and to those passing by. Conversations drift from household matters to

return of eight-day intervals and the collective pauses that allow people to recognise one another.

Participation in events such as Lum Sohpetbneng is, therefore, not only a matter of physical presence. Not everyone can make the journey on that day. Yet the way Lum Sohpetbneng circulates in everyday conversation—who asks whom if they are going, how rides are arranged, how absences are explained—adds substance to a communal life. Community here is built as much through anticipation, coordination and narration as through the pilgrimage itself.

Four days after Lum Sohpetbneng, another gathering once again brought villagers together. On 5 February, Shangpung marked the death anniversary of Woh Kiri Dalloi Dhar, a Jaintia freedom fighter. The programme began with a prayer at his monument, followed by a conference held at the community hall of Pohshong, a neighbourhood largely inhabited by Niamtre families. Although the programme was attended almost entirely by local residents, a friend told me firmly, "He did not die just for us Niamtre—he died for all the people of Shangpung."

Usually a badminton court, the hall was transformed by harsh white lights that illuminated faces both young and old, all dressed in traditional Pnar ceremonial attire. At the centre of the

stage, a large banner titled "National Indigenous Faith Conference" was flanked by portraits of Meghalaya freedom fighters: Kiang Nangbah, Pa Togan Sangma, U Tirot Sing and Woh Kiri Dalloi Dhar. The event unfolded through speeches, songs and cultural performances, including a drama depicting Kiri Dalloi's life—from his early Dalloiship to the brutality of British invasion.

Even to me, whose Pnar is limited, the play was comprehensible. Through the use of English and visual contrast—ironed suits and guns in hand—the British were sharply distinguished from those who resisted them in Shangpung. At the moment of Kiri Dalloi's death, my friends turned to me and jokingly asked, "Are you crying?" Of course, I could not fully grasp the violence of that history. Yet after months of living alongside the Niamtre, I felt a subtle, shared grief. What unfolded on stage was not distant fable, but a past that continued to shape the present.

Time, of course, has changed greatly since then. When suits no longer index colonial power and English circulates freely both online and offline, what might a younger generation feel when confronted with scenes of their past? This question stayed with me as the programme continued.

What struck me was not only the content of the commemoration but its temporal texture. Beginning with a marathon at dawn, the programme slowed ordinary weekday time, suspending daily routines to make room for remembrance. The past was not sealed off as history; it was reanimated through performance, narration and collective participation across generational lines.

Through a window of the community hall, I noticed several women walking past with baskets strapped to their foreheads, continuing with the day's work. Time among the Niamtre, I realised, is not a neutral backdrop but a social force—one that allows people to pause, gather, remember and then return to everyday responsibilities. By waiting, travelling, remembering and carrying on, community appears not as something one simply belongs to, but as something repeatedly enacted. It is through these shared rhythms—of markets, pilgrimages and commemorations—that people come together, slow down and recognise one another as part of a collective life.

(The writer is a PhD researcher at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology at Leiden University (Netherlands) and project researcher of the research project *Future Heritage: Conservation, Community and Contestation in the Eastern Himalayas*.)

## Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

No Confidence and The Speaker.

The opposition has very kindly sponsored a no confidence motion against the Speaker of the Lok Sabha. It is almost certain to fail. Arithmetic is a stubborn creature. If you have the numbers, you win. Parliament, like mathematics, respects addition and subtraction more than emotion.

But numbers do not erase meaning. A no confidence motion is not a casual complaint like grumbling about the canteen samosa being more air than potato. It is not about the tea being watery or the microphones malfunctioning selectively. It is a statement. A loud one.

It says the referee is suspected of playing for one team.

And that is serious business.

The Speaker's chair is not a party sofa where one lounges comfortably among loyal friends. It is meant to be closer to a judicial bench, only with better upholstery and slightly more dramatic lighting. When you occupy that chair, you are expected to rise above party lines. Not float above them on a cushion of convenience.

Traditionally, Speakers have come from the ruling side. That is perfectly acceptable. Everyone has a political past. Even the strict school prefect once belonged to a gang of biscuit thieves in kindergarten. But the moment you sit in that tall chair, armed with a microphone, a bell, and the power to mute the nation's loudest voices, you are expected to undergo instant spiritual transformation. From party warrior to constitutional monk.

Calm. Detached. Slightly boring. Instead, what we are witnessing today looks less like a monk and more like a cricket umpire who begins clapping enthusiastically when only one team hits a boundary. Imagine an umpire who raises his finger for LBW only when the opposition batsman is involved, but suddenly develops neck stiffness when the ruling side edges the ball to slip.

Neutrality cannot be selective. A Speaker must be firm, impartial, and ideally unexciting. Excitement is for election rallies. The Speaker's job is to ensure that tempers cool, rules apply equally, and the House functions. The moment he begins smirking at opposition members, or allowing one side endless monologues while the other side gets muted like a misbehaving child on a video call, something is not quite right. Democracy is not a one sided podcast.

Picture a traffic policeman at a busy junction. He whistles ferociously at cyclists and scooter riders. He fines them for being one inch over the zebra crossing. Meanwhile, a large SUV with tinted windows glides past majestically, perhaps even offering him a friendly wave. If you question him, he adjusts his cap and explains that rules must be applied with wisdom.

Wisdom, in this case, seems to mean flexibility for the powerful and rigidity for the ordinary.

A lawmaker who cannot uphold fairness inside Parliament resembles that traffic

cop. It may not be the haifa of money, but certainly of power. Power can be more intoxicating than currency. It whispers sweet assurances. It promises protection. It tempts even the disciplined.

But the Speaker's job is not to protect the government from discomfort. It is to protect the House from disorder and bias. That includes protecting the opposition's right to speak, question, and criticise.

If Parliament becomes a place where only praise is permitted, then we have accidentally converted a debating chamber into a fan club meeting.

Today, some of the sharpest speeches are coming from the opposition benches. Articulate, sometimes biting, occasionally inconvenient. But democracy was never designed to be comfortable. It was designed to be accountable. Discomfort is part of the design.

When members bring a no confidence motion against the Speaker, they are not merely attempting a procedural stunt. They are holding up a mirror. A mirror can be unpleasant. It reveals posture, expression, and sometimes an unflattering smirk. The motion may fail on paper. The ruling party will almost certainly win the division. Hands will be raised. Numbers will be counted. Headlines will declare victory. But the deeper question will remain.

Can the Speaker look at that chair tomorrow and ask himself a simple question.

'Am I a judge, or merely a well dressed traffic cop with selective eyesight?'

The dignity of the office does not come from the height of the chair, but from the weight of fairness. History has a strange habit. It forgets the vote count but remembers the conduct. It remembers who allowed voices to be heard and who pressed the mute button.

Power is temporary. Reputation is permanent.

And sir, history is not sentimental. It remembers fairness and ruthlessly ridicules the biased. That small smirk offered across the aisle may one day return amplified. The same people who are silent today may eventually find their voice. Democracy is not strengthened by silencing disagreement. It is strengthened by managing it with grace. The Speaker's bell is not a weapon. It is a reminder. A reminder that the House belongs to the nation, not to the ruling party of the day.

Arithmetic may defeat the motion. But morality is not decided by division of votes.

A no confidence motion against a Speaker is rare. It should make any occupant of that chair pause. Reflect. Examine.

Because long after the numbers have been recorded in the parliamentary archives, long after today's debates are forgotten, one question will echo.

Was he fair?

And that, more than arithmetic, will decide how history writes his name...

You can request for Bob's Banter by Robert Clements as a daily column on your whatsapp by sending him your name and phone number on bobsbanter@gmail.com

### Letters to the Editor

#### A New Low in Political Discourse

Editor,

It is unfortunate to see political discourse being reduced to personal attacks. Jawaharlal Nehru was a central figure in India's freedom struggle and played a foundational role in shaping modern India's democratic institutions, scientific temper, and foreign policy. Like any historical leader, his decisions can and should be debated critically but criticism should focus on policies and governance, not on insinuations about personal character without credible evidence.

In this context, the act of Union Textile Minister Giriraj Singh displaying six AI generated photographs of India's first Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru, in an attempt to portray him as a "womaniser" is highly condemnable. Such actions diminish the dignity of public office and divert attention from substantive policy discussions. Political leaders are expected to elevate debate, not reduce it to personal

insinuations about historical figures who played pivotal roles in shaping the nation.

Under the present regime, parliamentary debate increasingly appears to mirror the tone and rhetoric of election campaign platforms rather than serve as a forum for serious legislative deliberation. Instead of reasoned discussion, evidence-based argument, and bipartisan engagement, proceedings often reflect partisan sloganeering and historical blame narratives. This trend weakens the institutional sanctity of Parliament and risks normalising confrontational politics over constructive governance.

Similarly, in parliamentary debates, differences in ideology between leaders such as Narendra Modi and past prime ministers are part of democratic politics. However, constant blame-shifting to previous governments does little to address present challenges. Mature democracies thrive when discussions are centered on accountability, solutions, and constructive debate rather than character assassination.

India deserves a political

culture that respects history while engaging honestly with the present.

Yours etc.,  
Marbiang L Rymbai,  
Via email

#### India Must Recalibrate its Bangladesh Policy

Editor,

The last sentence of the editorial "BNP signals change" (ST February 16, 2026) is perceptive. India-Bangladesh relations are indeed entering a new phase and reconciliation with Bangladesh's evolving realities is essential. In the current context, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has emerged dominant with Tarique Rahman signalling a reset in foreign policy. Their stance emphasizes a "Bangladesh First" approach, diverging from the earlier one-power focus under Sheikh Hasina. A key friction point is Sheikh Hasina's continued stay in India, which BNP frames as an issue of sovereignty. At the same time, their mani-

festo stresses cooperative ties with neighbours for collective progress.

India preferred BNP's rise, but this shift presents both opportunities and challenges. Economic cooperation is a priority, yet border and security concerns remain sensitive. Hence the need for a balancing act. India must manage BNP's demand for Hasina's extradition while maintaining goodwill. Strengthening trade, connectivity, and energy cooperation can anchor ties despite political turbulence. Past mistrust over cross-border militancy requires careful handling to avoid setbacks. BNP's interest in reviving SAARC and recalibrating alliances means India must adapt to a more plural regional framework. Hence the last sentence of the editorial captures the essence: India cannot rely on old assumptions. It must reconcile with Bangladesh's new political realities and pursue a balancing act—firm on core interests, flexible in diplomacy, and proactive in economic cooperation.

Yours etc;  
VK Lyngdoh,  
Via email

#### Meghalaya's Border Realities

Editor,

As Bangladesh enters a new political phase, it seems to me that both policymakers and ordinary readers should keep one simple fact in mind. Relations between India and Bangladesh are not decided only in meeting rooms in Delhi or Dhaka. Along the border, they are felt in daily life. For people in Meghalaya and other North-eastern states, even small developments across the boundary can quickly affect security, work, and local peace. From what we see on the ground, this is a situation that deserves far more attention at the national level than it usually gets.

From what one has been reading in The Shillong Times over the past two years, it is hard to believe that Meghalaya's border troubles are only temporary. Reports during April to June 2024 spoke of river-boundary difficulties in the monsoon months. Stories in July and August noted BSF seizures and the persistence of smuggling routes. Later coverage between October and December mentioned

fencing delays and local tensions in areas such as South West Khasi Hills and East Jaintia Hills. Ground reports through 2025 have continued to refer to crossings through unfenced stretches, smuggling activity, disputes near the zero line, and the daily strain faced by officials and villagers in remote border areas. All this seems to show that the matter is continuing and touches the lives of ordinary families, not only the security forces.

Given this background, it would probably make sense if India's dealings with the present authorities in Dhaka paid closer attention to practical cooperation on the ground. Joint patrolling in sensitive stretches, quicker completion of fencing in the Meghalaya sector, wider use of properly regulated border haats so that small local trade can move into the legal channel, and better day-to-day coordination between neighbouring district officials could go a long way in easing local tension. Decisions taken in national capitals really need to translate into visible improvements for the people who actually live along the border.

Beyond the question of physical security, there is also the matter of public confidence. Whenever reports surface about insecurity faced by religious minorities across the border, it understandably creates concern in adjoining Indian districts where families and communities often share long social links. For this reason, it is important that the lawful rights and safety of all communities — Christians, Hindus, and others — continue to be protected in Bangladesh in line with constitutional safeguards and accepted norms. When conditions remain stable there, it naturally helps maintain calm on this side as well.

Much the same kind of practical worries can be seen in other border states too. Assam remains alert about migration pressure and organised cross-border crime. Tripura's economic prospects depend heavily on secure transit routes and smoothly functioning check-posts. Mizoram at times has to deal with humanitarian pressures linked to informal crossings. West Bengal, for its part, must constantly handle riverine

boundaries and regulated trade corridors. It may therefore be worth considering a more structured arrangement through which these states can regularly feed their ground experience into bilateral discussions, making cooperation more workable in practice.

For the ordinary public, the conclusion is fairly straightforward. Good relations between neighbours are judged not only by the statements issued after high-level meetings, but by whether people at the border feel safer, whether trade moves through lawful channels, and whether everyday uncertainty begins to lessen. Paying closer attention to Meghalaya's frontier realities could thus be a practical and sensible starting point for strengthening India-Bangladesh relations in this new phase.

Yours etc.,  
Jairaj,  
Via email

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“Learning never exhausts the mind.”

— Leonardo da Vinci

The Shillong Times

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Pandemonium in the Assembly

THE Assembly is a place for reasoned debates, not a platform for shouting matches. Elected members sitting in the Opposition may be agitated on several matters including long pending projects including the demand for the Inner Line Permit (ILP) which does not appear to be a priority for the NDA Government. The State Legislature is meant to be a place of constructive debate and democratic decision-making. The Opposition is not there to oppose everything that the government does but to point out governance loopholes after having done extensive ground work which involves studying files and getting answers to questions from the Right to Information (RTI) route so that the Government can be held accountable for its acts of omission and commission. Few people and organisations in Meghalaya actually use the RTI to detect wrongdoing in implementation of schemes and the reason why every project over-shoots the deadline by several years unlike other states where construction companies are pulled up for inordinate delays.

The bedlam in the Assembly on Wednesday was created by the VPP supremo, Ardent Basaiawmoit who tried to corner the government on the undue delay by the central government in granting the ILP to Meghalaya when it was quick to grant the same to Manipur on the eve of the last election following which the BJP won the election in that state. Is the NDA Government waiting for a similar situation to develop in Meghalaya where people are so desperate for the ILP that they will vote the BJP to power? It appears that the ILP has become a bargaining tool that Home Minister, Amit Shah will use on the eve of the next elections in 2028. Playing games with weaker states has always been Delhi's favourite play-book. Chief Minister Conrad Sangma is heard saying that the ILP is a collective burden of the people of Meghalaya hence all 60 MLAs need to work in tandem and meet the Union Home Minister in what is seen as a united effort. Already the Shillong MP, has briefed Amit Shah on the threats posed by open borders with Bangladesh and the unregulated cross-border migration. So, Amit Shah knows exactly why Meghalaya needs the ILP but will not budge and nor will he give reasons as to why the idea is not feasible. He keeps the politicians of Meghalaya in good humour whenever they meet him but refuses to take action. What is the way forward? That's where collective strategies are needed.

The State Assembly is not a performative space but one where despite all the rancour members must maintain decorum also because they are being watched by the younger generation of would-be politicians. When MLAs disrupt proceedings, business is dislocated and public faith in the democratic process is shaken. A disciplined, respectful, and thoughtful Assembly reflects the spirit of democracy and ensures that the people's voices are truly heard. Besides, the Opposition cannot just wait for the Assembly to voice their grievances. They ought to do it through the year and take up what the CAG reports regularly point out about the poor deployment of public funds and the fact that several Drawing and Disbursing Officers (DDOs) of the government are actually opening bank accounts to keep money not utilised in a particular financial year. This is a serious offence but has never been taken up in the Assembly.

After Ayodhya: A Play that Interrogates Theatre, Land, and Identity

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Last week, I was pleasantly surprised to be invited to a play titled 'After Ayodhya: Its Conscience and Man', performed by Pearly Dew Higher Secondary School in collaboration with Forever Young and the Maitshaphrang at the Meghalaya Bharat Scouts and Guides Hall, Shillong. Maitshaphrang is an organization founded by Michael Syiem, former president of the Khasi Students' Union, known for advocating the introduction of patrilineal traditions and the equitable distribution of property among all children. I do see the merit in the second argument, but not the first. Abandonment of matrilineal traditions will not only lead to chaos but, in the long run, weaken our political claim to our homeland. Despite our differences, however, I appreciate his energy and dedication to many causes, even at this advanced age—one being his commitment to promoting theatre among the Khasi.

Theatre among the Khasi, from what I have been told, is just over 100 years old, with the most popular groups being based in Jaintia Hills, especially Jowai. Not long ago, I met a young Pnar artist who spoke about her involvement in theatre in her hometown. Unfortunately, I had never seen a performance myself, so when I was invited to this play—written by Michael Syiem—I was excited to finally experience one. The title intrigued me. Ayodhya is closely associated with the Babri Masjid demolition, which signalled the rise of Hindutva forces in North India and eventually led to the elevation of Narendra Modi to the office of Prime Minister.

In the last parliamentary elections, Ayodhya again became an important flash-point, with Awadhesh Prasad of the Samajwadi Party, a Dalit (the first indigenous people of India), winning the Lok Sabha seat from the constituency. This victory symbolized the comeback of the non-Hindutva forces to stall the BJP's juggernaut, which wanted to win more than 400 seats, and, as alleged by many, to put them in a position to change the Constitution. Ever aware of the importance of optics, when Modi took his oath, he bowed before the copy of the Constitution to assure the voters, especially the backward classes, that

his party will never violate the Constitution, drafted by Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a Dalit. Therefore, I was doubly excited about attending the play. And I was not disappointed.

The play was a musical, and it began with the protagonist narrating an encounter between Conscience and three delegates representing two first world countries and one third world country. When asked how long it would take for their respective countries to become self-sufficient, the time period for the two first world countries varied from 20 to 50 years. However, for the delegate of the third world country, Conscience could not give a reply because, according to her, the country had too many god-men who all promised their own version of a stairway to heaven. Though not mentioned, the third world represents India, which is famous for producing many god-men, many of whom, in recent times have been very young.

One of the most powerful scenes from the play is when the various religions, viz., Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, are shown to be fighting each other to have the right to build their own place of worship. An armed character then appeared, threatening to kill everyone unless they vacated the site, as he intended to build a shopping mall instead. He was subsequently chased away by another character who claimed the armed man had illegally infiltrated and set up shop on his land. According to him, force was justified to defend land rights against trespassers. In the end, a scrap collector entered the scene after everyone had left, pleased that the destruction had left behind debris he could sell to support his impoverished family.

This particular scene had a lot of messages which give an insight into Michael Syiem's own thinking and politics. The KSU, of which he was the President, has long been fighting for the implementation of the Inner Line Permit (ILP), claiming that it will help stem the tide of illegal immigration into the state. The claim that the state is overrun by illegal immigrants is widely accepted, but it is not supported by data. However, in recent

times, that claim has gained more traction due to certain incidents.

Some of the people who died recently in the illegal mines in East Jaintia Hills have been alleged to be illegal Bangladeshis. There have also been several arrests of Bangladeshis crossing into the state in recent times. However, there are certain things that need to be considered. First, being a Bengali Muslim does not automatically mean that one is Bangladeshi. It would be like saying that all Bengali Hindus are East Pakistanis or that all Nepalis are recent migrants from Nepal. Many have lived in the region for a very long time. Also, it does appear that all the people caught were using the state as a transit to go to other places and not to settle here permanently. Some might linger, but eventually, without any work, they will leave. In fact, if one wants to control illegal immigration, coal mining must be completely banned in the state—something unlikely to happen.

True to Michael Syiem's politics, the scene suggests that while religious groups fight among themselves, illegal immigrants may eventually capture land and resources. I partly agree with some of the points. There is already an ongoing attempt in the Northeast and elsewhere to pit indigenous people against each other on the basis of religion. I do believe an attempt is being made in our state as well, and he is right to point that out. In that context, land for him is sacred, but not because of its affiliation to a particular religion, but because it is connected to the history and identity of the people. And therefore, to protect it, any measure, i.e., force, is justified. It is clear that I don't agree with some of the messaging embedded in the scene. In my view, the greater danger comes not from (non-existent) illegal immigrants but from members of our own community who exploit others for wealth, prestige, and power, including those who are attempting to use religion to divide indigenous people. Being the astute person that he is, Michael Syiem does understand that as well.

There is another scene where a businesswoman

is bragging about how she can make money by selling rubble, in this case the rubble from the destruction in Ayodhya. In fact, she revels in fishing in troubled waters if there is profit to be made. The scene was preceded by a song which was about money and what it can buy. To my pleasant surprise, the famous quote by Karl Marx, "Religion is the opium of the masses," was used to drive home the point of how those with money are using religion to keep people agitated while accumulating wealth. At another point in the play, the main protagonist lamented that in a village full of thatched houses, the only dwelling made of concrete (a symbol of prosperity) was the place of worship. Michael Syiem is right to have grown weary of religion, and his views on the link between the insatiable drive for profit and violence have been borne out by history. The most pertinent examples of this are colonialism, (neo) imperialism, and the genocide in Palestine, just to name a few.

In the end, Conscience comes back again, ties up the narrative, and brings the play to a conclusion. It was Rabindranath Tagore's poem "Leave This Chanting" that closed the show. What really impressed me were the catchy songs. I think the actors will become better with more exposure, and this is exactly what Michael Syiem wants. As someone who has been involved in theatre for a long time, he was really disappointed that it was not part of the film policy. This would have allowed the art form to grow in the state. In fact, the play was originally written as a poem and intended to be staged as a street play, but financial constraints prevented that. For this production, he received support from Chief Minister Conrad Sangma, MP from Shillong W. R. Kharluki, North Shillong MLA Adelbert Nongrum, and the Director of Arts and Culture. However, a dedicated institutional support system is needed so that other groups may also benefit. Through both his play and advocacy, this is what he seeks to achieve. I wish him all the best in that endeavour.

(The views expressed in the article are those of the author and do not reflect in any way his affiliation to any organisation or institution)

Silicon Snake Oil? The Boring Truth Behind the "AI PC" Revolution

By Sumendra Yadav

Walk into a store to buy a laptop in 2026, and it can feel less like shopping for a computer and more like picking out a robot assistant. Bright stickers labeled "AI inside" and "Copilot+ ready" dominate the marketing landscape, while traditional specifications have quietly receded into the background. This article examines the rise of the Neural Processing Unit (NPU), critically analyzing the architecture behind modern AI chips, the limitations of popular metrics like TOPS, and the genuine utility these processors offer. Rather than revolutionary "magic," the NPU's true value lies in energy efficiency and the democratization of local, private AI computation.

The marketing narrative surrounding modern laptops suggests a revolution: devices that think, anticipate, and create. However, for the average consumer, the question is no longer "Does it have AI inside?" but rather one of relevance. Does this technology address a real-world workflow requirement, or is it simply a marketing strategy designed to accelerate upgrade cycles?

To answer this question, we must look past the promotional material and examine the silicon itself—specifically, the rise of the Neural Processing Unit (NPU). This article provides a technical overview of NPU architecture,

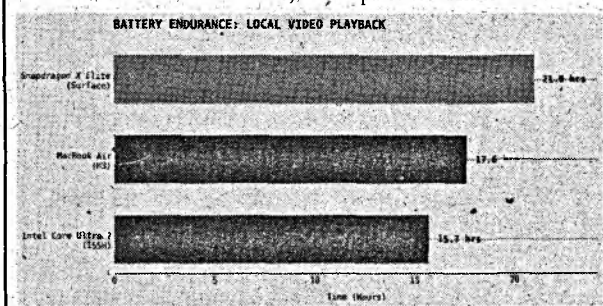
Currently, a significant software gap exists: millions of devices contain high-performance NPUs that remain largely idle because operating systems and third-party applications have not yet fully leveraged this hardware capability.

If we strip away marketing rhetoric about generative creation, the NPU's true utility emerges not as a tool for creativity, but as a tool for energy conservation. To resolve the paradox of the NPU, we must evaluate these chips based on what they save rather than what they can create.

In previous computing generations, continuous background tasks—noise suppression during video calls, biometric face tracking—were handled by the GPU or CPU. While effective, these general-purpose processors are energy-intensive. The NPU functions as a specialized "traffic controller," offloading repetitive, matrix-heavy tasks from power-hungry components.

Figure 1. Battery life comparison across platforms in standardized local video playback tests. The Snapdragon X Elite platform demonstrates significantly improved efficiency compared to traditional x86 architectures.

Independent analysis of the Qualcomm Snapdragon X Elite reveals clear efficiency divergence compared to traditional x86 archi-



critiques the metrics used to market these chips, and presents an evidence-based evaluation of their practical utility.

To understand the NPU, we must first understand the architecture it disrupts. For the past three decades, personal computing has relied on a dual-processor partnership:

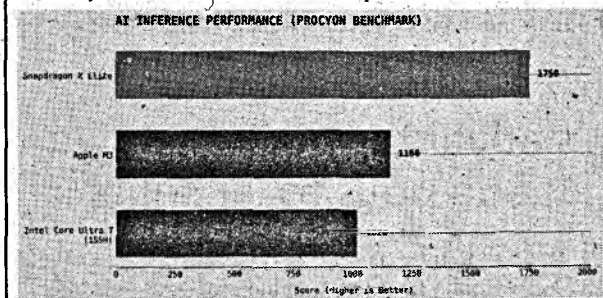
Central Processing Unit (CPU): The generalist processor handling serial logic, operating system operations, and linear computational tasks. Graphics Processing Unit (GPU): The specialist processor designed for parallel tasks including gaming, video rendering, and early AI workloads.

We have now entered the era of the heterogeneous computing trio. Unlike the CPU, designed for versatility, or the GPU, which con-

textures (Intel/AMD) and Apple's M-series chips. As illustrated in Figure 1, the architecture prioritizing specialized processing enables "all-day" battery life that essentially doubles the standard 8-hour workday, achieving outputs of 21 hours in specific use cases.

Figure 2. Procyon AI Computer. Vision benchmark results comparing NPU throughput across major platforms.

In the Procyon AI Computer Vision benchmark (Figure 2), the performance distinctions become pronounced. While Apple maintains leadership in single-core CPU performance, the Snapdragon X Elite's NPU efficiency and multi-core handling represent a serious contender, exceeding x86 alternatives by margins of 50-70% in AI-specific workloads.



sumes significant power to render pixels, the NPU is a domain-specific processor optimized for one specific mathematical operation: matrix multiplication—the fundamental backbone of deep neural networks (DNNs).

The value of these "AI chips" lies in their architecture. They achieve speed and efficiency not merely by being faster, but by being narrower. NPUs incorporate vast numbers of smaller transistors optimized for low-precision calculations (INT8 or INT4) rather than the high-precision floating-point arithmetic (FP32) typical of CPUs. This architectural choice enables inference tasks—applying pre-trained models to new data—without the significant energy penalty associated with GPU activation. Crucially, the NPU is not "smarter" than a CPU; it is simply more efficient at the specific mathematics that modern AI software requires. Because the physics of matrix multiplication is challenging to market to general audiences, manufacturers have developed a metric to quantify this capability: TOPS (Trillions of Operations Per Second). A numerical arms race is currently underway among silicon manufacturers—Qualcomm Snapdragon X Elite (45 TOPS), Apple M4 (38 TOPS), and Intel Core Ultra series with competitive specifications.

However, from a scientific perspective, TOPS is a fragile metric. It represents theoretical maximum throughput, typically measured under ideal laboratory conditions that rarely manifest in real-world usage. Comparing devices based solely on TOPS is analogous to evaluating automobile performance by measuring maximum engine RPM in neutral—it demonstrates potential, but without optimized software, the hardware produces noise without meaningful output.

While hardware efficiency provides immediate benefits, the long-term implication of NPUs is the democratization of AI through local processing. Currently, most popular AI tools operate on massive server farms, presenting privacy risks and latency issues. A powerful NPU enables users to bring the intelligence home.

The objective of consumer hardware should be user empowerment through intelligence ownership. Running AI locally means documents, queries, and data never leave the device—creating a privacy air-gap essential for enterprises and security-conscious individuals. Local AI additionally enables customization through quantized models (compressed models fitting specific memory constraints) and distilled models (smaller, faster versions of large language models). This paradigm shifts the dynamic from subscription-based dependency on large technology companies to tools that users own and control.

The arrival of NPUs in everyday computers marks an important milestone: chips are now designed to think, not merely calculate. However, the revolution is quieter than advertisements suggest. Instead, we are experiencing evolutionary efficiency. The NPU addresses the power problem of the AI era before fully solving the application problem. For consumers evaluating these devices: do not be swayed by the "Magic" of generative capabilities. Instead, examine the "Efficiency"—battery life data and the privacy capabilities of local processing. By leveraging the NPU for local, private, and efficient computing, users can transform marketing hype into a practical tool for the future.

(The writer is a First Year B.Tech Student, Plaksha University, Mohali)

Managing Shillong's Traffic Congestion

Editor,

The news item, "Shillong at Standstill again" (ST, Feb 12, 2026), once again underscores the hardships citizens endure due to frequent traffic congestion in Shillong, with no clear solutions in sight. However, the relative ease of driving on most Shillong roads during the schools' winter break, when congestion was markedly reduced, offered a revealing contrast. This strongly suggests that the daily practice of individually dropping off and picking up students when school reopens is one of the major contributors to the city's traffic woes. Once the congestion starts during the morning hours, it often cascades through the day and well into the evening hours.

One of the possible remedies generally expressed is the introduction of school buses, and this is reinforced by the generally positive response to the STEM bus service in ferrying students. The logic is simple: one bus carrying several dozen students can replace many private vehicles. Even accounting for some carpooling, the potential reduction of congestion by these buses could be substantial.

While introducing school buses could be a possible remedy, deploying multiple buses along Shillong's predominantly double-lane roads may create new challenges, such as difficulties in overtaking amid steady oncoming traffic. This may potentially add to the congestion instead

of easing it. Therefore, if school buses are introduced, a phase-wise approach may be adopted. Larger schools which draw students from multiple parts of the city and whose students' reliance on private vehicles contributes most to traffic congestion should typically be prioritised for the introduction of school buses, with gradual implementation and continuous assessment of traffic conditions before scaling up.

Meanwhile, the state government seems inclined to expand the fleet of STEM buses. While this may be considered a proactive move, it could also signal a reluctance or inability to urge large schools to assume this responsibility themselves. Relying on government-run transport risks shifting accountability away from institutions that may be fully capable of doing this themselves. Across Indian cities, many large schools own and successfully manage their own school bus services.

As of now, it remains unclear whether the government has encouraged schools to operate buses or whether school authorities are unwilling to assume this role. Parents also seem to have shown limited collective support. This lack of transparency has left the public largely uninformed.

However, the impact of school buses in reducing congestion will remain limited if vehicle numbers continue to grow unchecked. Even infrastructure measures such as flyovers, underground roads, and road widening, if ever feasible, or a new Shillong township, can provide only temporary relief if the growth of vehicles persists. Traf-

fic personnel will have limited capacity to control once roads reach saturation, and regulatory measures like the odd-even rule will lose effectiveness over time. Therefore, addressing congestion without regulating vehicle ownership is akin to treating the symptoms while ignoring the root cause.

Singapore's Vehicle Quota System (VQS) provides a model for controlling vehicle growth by capping new vehicle ownership through a competitive bidding system for Certificates of Entitlement, which is aligned with limited road capacity. The scheme has become a cornerstone of the city's traffic management strategy and has encouraged commuters to use the city's efficient public transport systems.

While the Singapore model may not be directly applicable here, a more practical local measure would be to link vehicle registration to proof of an available parking space within the applicant's premises or at a designated facility. Such a measure can be adopted in consultation with the relevant local authorities.

Currently, many registered vehicles are seen parked overnight along tight single-lane roads in many Shillong localities due to the lack of adequate parking facilities. This causes inconvenience to commuters and restricts emergency access. Moreover, these vehicles add to the congestion when they enter the city roads. Linking vehicle registration to proof of parking availability would discourage excessive vehicle ownership and help reduce congestion. However, implementing such

a policy will require strong political will and the ability to overlook entrenched business interests.

Overall, with coordinated and sustained action, Shillong's traffic congestion can be reduced and prevented from worsening. Beyond other indeterminate measures, mandating school bus transport for large institutions and regulating vehicle registration in line with road and parking capacity are possible solutions, provided these are introduced and enforced. Equally important is sustained civic engagement on the matter, with constructive suggestions on appropriate platforms to build consensus and pressure.

Yours etc.,  
K L Tariang,  
Via email

Disruptions to Global AI Summit

Editor,

The recently concluded AI summit at Bharat Mandapam positioned India at the center of the global artificial intelligence conversation. With leaders, innovators, and policymakers gathering to discuss governance, infrastructure, and ethical AI, the event signalled ambition and intent. Announcements regarding expanded GPU capacity by IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnav and the keynote presence of Bill Gates reinforced India's aspiration to become a serious AI powerhouse.

However, the summit was not without turbulence. The controversy involving Galgotia University, widely reported by Reuters, has raised

uncomfortable questions about academic credibility and oversight. If reports suggesting misrepresentation of a robotic exhibit are accurate, this episode risks denting the integrity of an event meant to showcase innovation and transparency.

Equally concerning was the traffic chaos that unfolded across central Delhi during the summit. Commuters faced severe delays, diversions, and last minute route changes. While large international events inevitably disrupt city movement, better public advisories and coordinated planning could have mitigated the inconvenience to residents. Progress cannot come at the cost of public patience.

India's AI moment is real and significant. Yet global leadership in technology demands more than grand announcements. It requires institutional accountability, operational efficiency, and respect for citizens' daily lives. As we champion artificial intelligence for governance and urban management, perhaps the first test lies closer to home: using data driven planning to manage our own events seamlessly.

The summit was a bold step forward. Let the lessons learned ensure that future milestones reflect not just ambition, but excellence in execution.

Yours etc.,  
Shivani Pde,  
Via email

Strengthening Emergency Communication

Editor,

The recent security con-

cerns in the Garo Hills have once again brought the technical limitations of our regional communication infrastructure into sharp focus. While the transition of The North Eastern Service (NES) Of Akashvani to a 100W FM radio transmitter may seem modern, it has created a significant "coverage gap" for most sensitive border areas. Unlike FM radio, which relies on Line-of-Sight (LoS) propagation and is easily blocked by the rugged terrain of Meghalaya, shortwave radio utilises Near Vertical Incidence Skywave (NVIS) propagation. By reflecting signals off the ionosphere at near-vertical angles, NVIS provides a "blanket" of coverage that "rains down" into deep valleys and behind mountain ridges. This makes it immune to the "shadow zones" that render 100W FM radio transmitters useless in remote parts of Meghalaya.

By decommissioning the 50kW shortwave radio transmitter in 2019, we have sacrificed a resilient, terrain-independent communication system for a fragile, LoS one. For effective civil defense and emergency preparedness, it is essential that NES should be restored on shortwave radio. We need an infrastructure that can bypass local network failures and terrain obstacles to reach every citizen instantly.

Yours etc.,  
Hamemanbha Lyngdoh,  
Lawai,  
Via email

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"You have to think about, so why not think big?"  
— Donald Trump

**The Shillong Times**  
Vol No: LXVIII No. 189 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2026

**AI making waves**  
ARTIFICIAL Intelligence would power the world across multiple sectors in the years ahead. The five day India-AI Impact Summit in the national capital made waves with the presence of a battery of top technocrats, IT honchos, business leaders and was graced also by France's president Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Hosted by the central government's India AI Mission, it "marked a defining global inflection point, transitioning from dialogue to demonstrable impact." It envisioned a future where AI "advances humanity, fosters inclusive growth and safeguards our shared planet." AI's eminence in the public sphere is growing by the day after its slow beginning some 15 years ago. Almost every branch of science can be impacted by AI. India's transformation to AI is mainly led by startups, governmental pushes and policies like Digital India. Globally, AI's advances in recent years have been phenomenal and, on the current trajectory, "we're only a couple of years away from super intelligence."

AI also has the ability, it is promised, to "radically reduce poverty" and improve healthcare – areas of prime engagements for the third world. The AI market in India is sized at \$8 billion by now, registering a growth of 40 per cent in the last five years. Some 60,000 professionals here work in AI-related positions – a number that could double in the next two years. Alongside India, China too is making major forays into this technology. Education and healthcare are two areas where AI's impact could be felt widely. AI enables instant access to learning in any language; and in healthcare, it can detect diseases earlier and help in disease screening. India's successes in UPI, direct benefit transfer and other schemes have a direct bearing on AI. Artificial General Intelligence or AGI is cited as one of the "most momentous periods" in human history, like the advent of fire or electricity. As per one claim, AI is going to have 10 times the impact of the Industrial Revolution. Equally importantly, this is happening at 10 times the speed of past technological shifts. Industrialist Mukesh Ambani now promises to majorly power India's AI ambitions. He promises a Rs 10 lakh crore investment with a promise to revolutionise this sector; similar to what he did with mobile data 10 years ago. This year is cited as the threshold moment for Artificial General Intelligence that nears reality.

AI presents big opportunities for economic growth and social development. It could also pose challenges, some of them unforeseen as it evolves. There are also worries about data privacy, ethical aspects, and cyber attacks in relation to AI use. Fears of massive job losses are dismissed; rather, as in computers, it could create more opportunities for work. As the prime minister stated, "Some people fear AI and some take it as luck. AI is both luck and the future for us. India, from semiconductor to chip to quantum computing is getting stronger in all. So, let us make India affordable, securable in AI." A message, from UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, is significant: that the "future of AI cannot be decided by a handful of countries—and AI must belong to everyone."

#### Letters to the Editor

### Legislative Discourse versus Shouting Match

Editor,  
It was appalling for all of us to witness the high decibel shouting match which started from the Opposition bench and was aimed at putting the Government on the mat. What should have been a serious discussion of an important issue turned into a shouting match. If legislative discourse on Government failures and delivery gaps are found wanting and require deliberation these could have been sorted out in a more reasoned manner with facts and figures and with a calm demeanour. The Chief Minister had to also join in the discussion to tell the Opposition side that if they were serious about pursuing the issue of Inner Line Permit (ILP) then both sides should have converged and taken the matter to Delhi. But it seems like the ILP has become a blame game where one Party can take credit for raising a fiery storm in the Assembly. The Chief Minister is correct in pointing out that not once have the Opposition Parties written to the Home Ministry or even visited Delhi to pursue the matter. Such a manner of settling political scores undermines the ethics of legislative procedures and violates the sanctity of the House. Democracy gives us the right to question, to ask and to demand but not by banging tables and raising voices thereby reducing legislative debates to a slanging match.

### Meghalaya's Journey into India's Consciousness

Editor,  
I recently travelled to Mumbai, a city that never seems to pause for breath. The moment I stepped out of the airport, I was greeted by the familiar rush of humid air, honking taxis and an endless stream of people moving with purpose. Mumbai has always fascinated me, its energy, its resilience and its remarkable ability to make room for every dream.  
As I settled into a local taxi, I struck up a casual conversation with the driver. It is something I often do when I travel; I find that taxi drivers are the best storytellers of a city. He asked me where I was visiting from. When I replied, "Meghalaya," he immediately nodded and said, "Oh haan, North East mein."  
I was pleasantly surprised. He went on to mention Shillong and even spoke about Cherrapunji. For a moment, I simply listened, absorbing how he spoke about my home state. What surprised me even more was when he referred to the state's famous haldi, saying he had heard about its quality. There was recognition, familiarity and even admiration in his voice.

# "Beyond Blame: Rethinking Meghalaya's Coal Crisis Through Livelihood and Policy"

By Dr. Treemmi Lamare

The recent coal mine tragedy in East Jaintia Hills has once again brought the coal issue of Meghalaya into sharp public focus, not only within the state but also at the national level. In any democratic society, such incidents naturally invite criticism, questioning and political debate. Opposition parties have raised concerns, accountability has been demanded and discussions have intensified across different platforms be it in person or social media. This in itself reflects the strength of democracy. However, at a time when families are mourning and many households are anxious about their economic survival, the larger question before us should not be limited to who is responsible. The deeper and more urgent question is how we move forward in a way that protects both human life and human livelihood.

Coal in Meghalaya has never been merely an industrial activity. For decades, particularly in the undivided Jaintia Hills, it has functioned as the economic backbone of many people. The coal economy has not been confined to mine owners alone. It has sustained daily wage labourers, truck drivers, loaders, mechanics, roadside vendors, tea stall operators, small shopkeepers and transport workers and this economic chain has been wider and interconnected across the state. In many villages of Jaintia hills, coal income financed education, medical treatment, construction of homes and basic household security. For a significant section of society, coal was not simply a source of income but a means of upward mobility and self reliance. Generations grew up in an environment where mining was part of everyday life, shaping livelihood and economic behaviour. To ignore this historical reality is to misunderstand the depth of the issue. The ban imposed in 2014 by the National Green Tribunal on rat-hole mining was driven by genuine concerns regarding environmental damage and safety risks. However, while the ban aimed at environmental protection and worker safety, it did not fully address the immediate economic consequences for thousands of families dependent on coal. A legal prohibition, even if justified, does not automatically create new sources of employment. The sudden

disruption left many communities facing uncertainty and financial hardship. Alternative livelihood schemes were introduced over time, but the transition from a coal-based economy to diversified sectors is complex and cannot happen overnight. From field observations and ongoing research that I carried out, it is evident that while efforts have been made, the shift remains gradual and incomplete. Economic transformation requires time, planning and sustained support. In this difficult phase, the role of the State Government becomes central.

The Meghalaya Democratic Alliance Government led by the National People's Party has had to govern within constitutional limits, court directives and financial constraints, while also responding to the expectations of the people. Managing such a sensitive issue requires balance and patience. Rather than engaging only in political confrontation, the present government has attempted to create alternative economic pathways to reduce overdependence on coal. This approach deserves careful recognition.

One of the key areas of focus has been youth empowerment and entrepreneurship. Through initiatives such as the Chief Minister's Elevate Programme, young people have been encouraged and supported to start their own ventures. This is significant in a state where government jobs alone cannot absorb the growing workforce. The Meghalaya Grassroots Music Project has also recognised the economic potential of the creative sector, showing that culture and talent can become sources of income. These initiatives reflect a broader understanding that development must expand into multiple sectors and not remain limited to extractive activities. Alongside these efforts, the government has placed emphasis on agriculture, horticulture and rural development. Support for organic farming, value addition, farmer cooperatives and better market access has aimed to strengthen traditional sectors.

Tourism promotion has sought to use Meghalaya's natural beauty and cultural richness as economic assets. Skill development programmes have been in-

troduced to prepare youth for emerging opportunities. While these measures may not immediately match the scale of the coal economy, they indicate a serious attempt to diversify income sources and build resilience. The process may be gradual, but it is visible and ongoing.

It is also important to remember that a government is not an abstract machine operating in isolation. It is run by individuals who must weigh court orders, environmental responsibilities, public welfare and financial realities. Decisions are often shaped by constraints beyond the state's full control. In such a situation, stability and steady policy direction become essential. The present government has attempted to maintain this balance while gradually expanding livelihood options. These efforts should be evaluated fairly and strengthened where necessary, rather than dismissed outright.

At the same time, the public conversation must rise above extreme positions. The issue is not about defending mining at any cost, nor about rejecting it without considering the consequences for workers and families. If mining is to continue in any form, it must follow scientific methods, proper safety standards and strict environmental safeguards. However, any reform must also be phased and sensitive. Abrupt actions without proper rehabilitation planning can push vulnerable populations into deeper hardship or informal activities, which defeats both environmental and social objectives.

Repeated political accusations, especially in the immediate aftermath of tragedy, may create noise and temporary attention but rarely produce long-term solutions. Blame alone does not rebuild livelihoods, improve safety mechanisms or restore damaged ecosystems. Democracy requires accountability, but it also requires responsibility and constructive engagement. Those who criticise must also contribute workable alternatives. If the genuine concern is for coal-dependent families, then practical policy suggestions must accompany public statements. Meghalaya stands today at an important turning point.

The real challenge is to balance environmental protection with economic dignity. Court directives define legal boundaries, but lasting change requires cooperation between the Centre, the State Government and local communities. No family should be forced to choose between compliance with environmental rules and survival. The way forward must include careful livelihood mapping, structured rehabilitation plans, scientific regulation where mining is permitted and strong enforcement of safety standards. At the same time, the Central Government should recognise that regions historically dependent on coal require targeted assistance during this difficult transition.

Ultimately, the coal issue in Meghalaya is not simply a political controversy or an environmental dispute. It is a question about how a society manages change while protecting its people. A mature democracy does not remain trapped in cycles of accusation; it moves forward by building solutions through dialogue, planning and shared responsibility. This is a moment for steady leadership, thoughtful reform and collective commitment. At the same time, this is also a moment for critics and opposition voices to rise to the responsibility that democracy entrusts to them.

Criticism is necessary and accountability strengthens governance, but repeated accusations without constructive proposals do little to secure either safety or livelihood. If there are shortcomings, let them be identified clearly. If there are better pathways, let them be articulated with clarity and sincerity. The people whose lives depend on these decisions deserve more than political contestation; they deserve practical recommendations and collaborative problem-solving. The future of Meghalaya's coal regions cannot be shaped by blame alone. It must be shaped by informed debate, realistic planning and shared commitment across party lines. If approached with balance, mutual respect and genuine concern for those on the ground, Meghalaya can move beyond crisis and build a more diversified, secure and hopeful economic future for the generations to come.

(The writer is Post Doctoral Fellow, ICSSR, New Delhi).

# The True Cost of Sleeplessness in the Digital Age

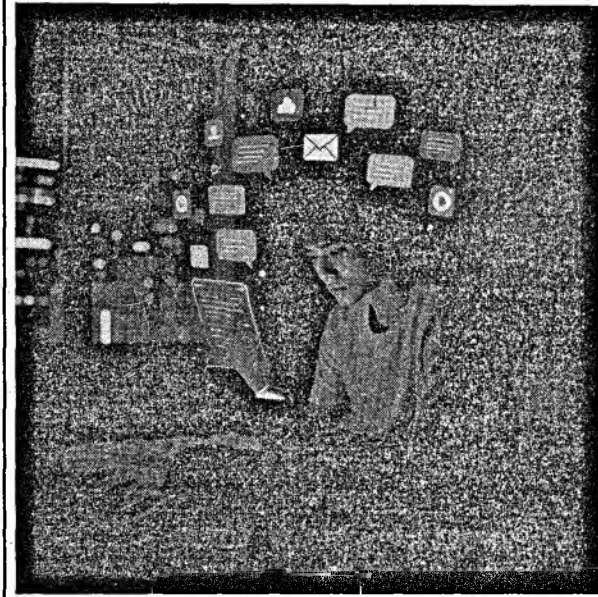
By Dr Omarlin Kyndiah

Under the framework of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Value Added Courses on Health and Wellness aim to equip students with essential life skills that promote holistic development. Among the foundational pillars of health: nutrition, physical activity, and mental well-being, sleep remains one of the most underestimated. This chapter explores sleep as a biological necessity and examines its profound impact on individual health, productivity, and overall well-being.

Sleep is not a luxury but a biological requirement, as vital as food and water. Research in developed countries shows that millions of people suffer from chronic sleep deprivation or poor-quality sleep. For example, studies indicate

quality. A powerful yet often overlooked measure is regular exposure to natural daylight. Experts recommend a minimum of four hours of daily sunlight, particularly during morning and early afternoon hours, to help reset and stabilize the circadian rhythm. Natural light activates the Suprachiasmatic Nucleus (SCN) through the retina. SCN inhibits the Paraventricular Nucleus (PVN) which stimulates melatonin (sleep hormone) through biochemical cascade. Sunlight signals the brain that it is daytime, promoting alertness during the day and timely melatonin release at night. Without adequate daylight, sleep patterns can become misaligned, making it difficult to fall asleep at an appropriate hour.

Additional strategies to promote sleep health include



that in the United States, about one-third of adults sleep less than the recommended seven hours per night, and nearly two-thirds report non-restorative sleep. Chronic insomnia, defined as difficulty falling or stay-

maintaining a consistent sleep-wake schedule, establishing a relaxing wind-down routine, limiting caffeine and alcohol intake late in the day, and reducing screen exposure before bedtime. For individuals with chronic

*"The consequences extend beyond daytime fatigue, including impaired mood, concentration, memory, and decision-making, as well as increased risks of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, depression, obesity, and weakened immunity."*

ing asleep for three months or longer, affects roughly one in ten individuals worldwide. The consequences extend beyond daytime fatigue, including impaired mood, concentration, memory, and decision-making, as well as increased risks of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, depression, obesity, and weakened immunity.

The economic impact of sleep deprivation is also substantial. Studies in 15 major economies suggest that insomnia costs billions of dollars annually, primarily due to reduced workplace productivity and absenteeism. People affected by insomnia report they would trade nearly 14 percent of their annual income to sleep better – a striking indicator of the personal and societal value of restorative sleep. Comparable national data for India is currently limited or unavailable, highlighting the need for research on sleep health in Indian populations to understand its prevalence, consequences, and economic burden.

Modern lifestyles further exacerbate the problem. Late-night exposure to smartphones, tablets, and laptops disrupts the circadian rhythm, the body's internal 24-hour biological clock that regulates sleep and wake cycles. Blue light, emitted by screens and LEDs, suppresses melatonin – the hormone responsible for sleepiness, disrupting the body's circadian rhythm and delaying sleep onset. Exposure to blue light in the evening tricks the brain into feeling alert, making it difficult to fall asleep. In effect, many individuals function like shift workers, disconnected from natural light-dark cycles.

Restoring healthy sleep patterns requires attention to both sleep quantity and

insomnia, evidence-based behavioural and medical interventions are available and often highly effective.

Environmental and social factors also influence sleep quality. Nearly half of pet owners share their beds with animals. While pets provide emotional comfort and security, studies suggest that about one-third of people experience sleep disruptions due to pet movement, noise, or allergens. Simple adjustments, such as providing pets with a nearby sleeping area or improving room ventilation, can help balance emotional closeness with restorative sleep. Evidence also indicates that children sleeping with pets do not necessarily experience poorer sleep and may benefit from increased security and reduced nighttime anxiety.

In a culture that often glorifies busyness, sleep is frequently undervalued. However, scientific evidence clearly demonstrates that inadequate or poor-quality sleep carries significant physical, emotional, and economic consequences. Within the vision of NEP 2020, promoting sleep literacy is essential for nurturing healthier, more productive, and emotionally resilient citizens. Developing research on sleep health in India will help inform public policies and educational programs aimed at improving the nation's overall well-being.

When it comes to health and wellness, sleep quality and sleep quantity must go hand in hand. Protecting sleep is not merely a personal responsibility but a societal priority.

(The writer is Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Biochemistry at St. Edmund's College, Shillong)

### Traffic Jam in Khliehriat: A Daily Struggle for Students and Teachers

Editor,  
Khliehriat, 19th February 2026 — What should have been an ordinary school morning turned into yet another frustrating reminder of a persistent problem. I left my home early, determined to reach my workplace in Rymbai on time. However, like most days, I found myself trapped in a long line of vehicles along the Khliehriat-Lad Rymbai route.

For the past two years, I have been travelling daily from Khliehriat to Rymbai, and the experience has become all too familiar. The primary cause of congestion is the regular movement of heavy trucks during peak school hours. These massive vehicles, often carrying materials, move slowly and occupy a significant portion of the already limited road space. As a result, smaller vehicles, school buses, teachers, and students are forced to wait helplessly in traffic.

This is not an isolated incident but a recurring issue. Almost every morning, commuters face delays that disrupt their schedules. Students, despite leaving home early, often arrive late at school. Unfortunately, many are scolded or even punished for circumstances beyond their control. Teachers, too, struggle to reach

their workplaces on time, beginning the day under stress and pressure. Such repeated disruptions affect not only punctuality but also the overall learning environment.

Khliehriat is an important and growing area, witnessing increased commercial and transportation activities. While the movement of goods is essential for economic development, it should not come at the cost of students' education and daily discipline. A balance must be struck between commercial transport and public convenience.

The concerned authorities may consider restricting the movement of heavy trucks during peak morning school hours. Fixing designated time slots for large vehicles, deploying traffic personnel at critical junctions, and exploring alternative routes for heavy transport could significantly reduce congestion. In the long term, road widening and improved traffic planning are necessary to accommodate the growing volume of vehicles.

Traffic management is not merely about convenience; it directly impacts education, productivity, and public well-being. It is time this daily struggle of students and teachers in Khliehriat receives the attention it deserves.

Yours etc.,  
Zakaria Darnei,  
Via email

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Cherrapunji, for its unique heritage and even for its high-quality products such as turmeric, mandarin, ginger etc. Increasingly, when conversations turn to the North East, Meghalaya features prominently in people's minds.

It is encouraging to see how strategic promotion, improved connectivity and consistent engagement have positioned the state on both the national and global map. The recognition feels organic, but it is undoubtedly the result of sustained vision and effort. As a Meghalayan, I feel a quiet sense of gratitude for the consistent efforts made to project the true identity of our state. The recognition we see today did not happen by chance; it reflects vision, commitment and sustained work in placing Meghalaya confidently on the national and global map.

As the taxi moved through Mumbai's crowded streets, I felt a quiet sense of pride. Awareness may seem like a small thing, but it represents connection. It means stories are travelling. It means identities are being acknowledged.

Five years ago, I had to explain where I came from. Today, people know. They recognise. They appreciate our existence.

And in that ride across Mumbai, I realised that Meghalaya's journey much like mine has moved forward, steadily, and confidently, carving its own space in the national conversation.

Yours etc;  
Jack Syiemlieh,  
Via email

That brief exchange transported me back five years to another visit to Mumbai. I remember sitting in a taxi then too, answering the same question about where I was from. When I said "Meghalaya," the driver looked puzzled. I had to explain that it was in the North East. Even then, the most common response I received was, "Oh, Assam?" For many, the entire region was often reduced to a single name.

Back then, I would find myself explaining repeatedly about Meghalaya's distinct identity, its culture, its people and its landscapes. Awareness was limited, and our state was often overshadowed by general references to the North East.

This time, however, the difference was striking. That simple conversation meant more to me than he probably realised. It reflected a quiet but meaningful shift. Meghalaya is no longer just a distant, lesser-known state tucked away in the hills. It is emerging as a recognised destination, a name that stands on its own.

The conversation made me reflect on how much has changed over the years. There has been a determined effort to strengthen the state's identity, to showcase its culture, natural beauty, agriculture and tourism beyond regional boundaries. That sustained push has clearly begun to bear fruit.

Today, Meghalaya is not merely grouped under a broad reference to the North East. It is recognised in its own right, for Shillong, for

"High expectations are the key to everything."

— Sam Walton

## The Shillong Times

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### A Painful Loss for Meghalaya

THE sudden passing away of MP, **Ricky AJ Syngkon** has left a deep and painful void in the public life of Meghalaya. His untimely death is not just a personal tragedy for his family; his Party the VPP and his ardent supporters but for the thousands of voters who trusted him to deliver on his promises as an MP. Dr Syngkon was respected by people across party lines because of his pleasant demeanour. In a sense he represented true democratic values; would listen more than speak when in a conversation and believed that partisan politics should not stand in the way of development. Hence, he could call on different ministries and speak about Meghalaya's urgent concerns. In a political climate often marked by shrill rhetoric and hardened positions, Ricky Syngkon brought a tone of civility and substance. He believed that politics was not theatre but service.

Ricky Syngkon belonged to a generation of leaders who carried both youthful energy and a quiet resolve. As a representative from Meghalaya, he understood the unique aspirations and anxieties of a hill state negotiating modernity, identity, and development. In Parliament, he spoke with clarity and conviction about the concerns of Meghalaya—connectivity, unemployment, environmental protection, recognition of the Khasi language and safeguarding of indigenous rights. Unlike other MPs he was not given to drama and his speeches in Parliament were not performative; they were clear, concise and definitive. He did not posture; he participated. He did not merely occupy a seat; he used it. Because of his exceptionally genteel nature Dr Syngkon was genuinely respected. Often, he shared his concerns for the growing poverty in Meghalaya and wondered why statehood could not deliver the people from this tragedy.

For the youth of Meghalaya, his journey symbolised possibility. He showed that one could emerge from the hills, remain rooted in one's culture, and still engage meaningfully with the national discourse. He carried the stories of his people into spaces where they are too often misunderstood or overlooked. His voice gave assurance that the Northeast is not peripheral but central to the Indian story. Dr Syngkon was known for his accessibility to all who had a grievance. Whether addressing development gaps or advocating for better infrastructure, he demonstrated a grounded commitment to practical change. His death is painful because people feel his is an unfinished task. There was so much more he was expected to do, so many hopes invested in his leadership. The sudden silencing of a public servant in mid-stride intensifies the grief. It is a reminder of how fragile life is, even for those in positions of influence. Yet even in loss, there is a legacy. The measure of a leader is not merely in years served but in the integrity and intention with which those years were lived. Ricky Syngkon's contribution to public life will be remembered in the dignity of his conduct and the sincerity of his advocacy. The people of Meghalaya will carry forward the causes he championed, and in doing so, keep his spirit alive. At this moment of mourning, the people of Meghalaya stand in solidarity with his family and loved ones. However, his absence leaves a space that cannot easily be filled. He was a role model of humility and empathy. Hopefully his life will inspire others to enter public service with humility, courage, and a steadfast commitment to the common good.

## Enough is Enough! Only State-Owned Mining is the Path to Equality, Safety, and Responsibility

By Avner Pariat

The recent tragic explosion in an illegal coal mine in East Jaintia Hills, which claimed the lives of 31 workers (as of the time of writing) has cast a long and dark shadow over Meghalaya. It is a brutal reminder of the human cost of the "rat-hole" mining that has been banned by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) since 2014 but continues to operate in the shadows. While the state government has constituted probes and made arrests regarding this specific incident, the disaster underscores a systemic failure that demands a radical, structural solution.

For too long, the extraction of Meghalaya's mineral wealth—particularly coal and limestone—has been plagued by illegality, safety hazards, and environmental degradation. The path forward does not lie in tinkering with the current system but in a fundamental shift in philosophy. The Meghalaya government must assume direct state ownership and operation of coal and limestone mining through a competent state corporation. This model is the only way to ensure equality, safety, and long-term environmental responsibility while simultaneously providing a framework to minimize risk for private sector participation.

The current situation is a paradox. On one hand, the state government is ostensibly moving towards regulated coal scientific mining but on the other hand, the February 2026 blast reveals that illegal, hazardous rat-hole mining is rampant and organized. Earlier, the Meghalaya High Court even had to direct the state to monitor a major cement company to ensure it did not engage in illegal limestone mining. This dichotomy reveals that the state's role has been reduced to that of a permitter and police officer, a task at which it is demonstrably struggling. The lure of quick profits for private entities, combined with weak enforcement, creates a deadly game of cat-and-mouse where regulations are circumvented, and workers bear the ultimate price.

Under the current system, the benefits of mining have often been concentrated in the hands of a few, while the costs—polluted rivers, destroyed landscapes, and lost lives—are borne by the majority. A state-owned en-

terprise would be mandated to operate for public benefit. Royalties and profits would flow directly into the state exchequer, funding public goods like infrastructure, healthcare, and education. For Meghalaya, this means coal and limestone wealth translating into tangible improvements in the lives of all its citizens, particularly in mining-affected communities.

European experience demonstrates that state ownership can be a powerful vehicle for

ownership can manage transformation with robust social safeguards. PGE pursued decarbonisation strategies with an agreement signed in 2023 that provided comprehensive employment protection, including severance pay and miners' benefits. Similarly, PGG set a final closure (by 2049) in a 2021 agreement which guarantees protections for workers. This is the added advantage of State ownership. It allows for long-term planning that balances environmental imperatives with



equitable development. Sweden's state-owned mining company LKAB provides an exemplary model of how state ownership can prioritize safety without compromising efficiency. As one of Europe's largest iron ore producers, with over 4,500 employees and annual revenues exceeding 4 billion USD, LKAB

social stability. Rather than abrupt closures that devastate communities, such as the 2014 NGT ban, state-controlled companies can implement gradual transitions with negotiated protections for workers. This is exactly the kind of responsible approach Meghalaya needs as it considers the future of

*The current situation is a paradox. On one hand, the state government is ostensibly moving towards regulated coal scientific mining but on the other hand, the February 2026 blast reveals that illegal, hazardous rat-hole mining is rampant and organized. Earlier, the Meghalaya High Court even had to direct the state to monitor a major cement company to ensure it did not engage in illegal limestone mining.*

operates the world's largest underground iron ore mine in Kiruna, Sweden. It has been ranked highly with regards to compliance to indigenous rights and resource extraction regulations. This demonstrates that a state-owned enterprise can achieve world-class standards through systematic planning, good management, and a culture that places worker protection at its core.

Going further, in Poland, two state-controlled companies—PGE (lignite mining) and PGG (hard coal mining)—reveal how state

its mining sector. Private operators, especially illegal ones, have little incentive to bear the high cost of environmental rehabilitation. The state, however, cannot walk away. As the custodian of the environment, the government must internalize these costs. By controlling the entire mining lifecycle, the state can guarantee that land is reclaimed, water sources are protected and that workers—not only the owners—benefit.

While European examples provide inspiration, the most relevant model for

Meghalaya might be Telangana's Singareni Collieries Company Limited (SCCL). SCCL conducts its operations using environmentally safe technologies, while implementing comprehensive Mine Closure Plans from the very beginning. Their commitment extends far beyond compliance: they have planted over 77 million saplings, and crucially, they treat and supply 820 million litres of water annually to meet local irrigation and community needs. The water supplied by Singareni enables cultivation in about 13,625 acres. SCCL has also established skill development centres in old mine buildings to provide training and employment opportunities to unemployed youth in nearby areas. The company has already set up solar plants with a capacity of 245.5 megawatts on its unused lands, and once the second phase is completed, Singareni will be recognized as a Net Zero Carbon Emission Company.

For Meghalaya, this model demonstrates a clear path forward. The state, through a corporation, would mine the resources and set the standards. This transition is not only desirable but increasingly feasible. The Meghalaya government already has a Department of Mining and Geology and the Meghalaya Mineral Development Corporation Ltd., which can be strengthened and empowered for this role. The state has also already shown its willingness to pursue scientific mining; this is the next logical step. By embracing state-owned mining, Meghalaya can transform a sector mired in exploitation into a vehicle for equitable development. It can honour the memory of all the workers lost in the mines of the state by building a system where such tragedies can never happen again.

It is time for the government to move away from giving in to private greed into being the guardian of the public good. Many citizens I have spoken to, have expressed their strong desire to see their communities grow and their state to thrive, from these resources. Convincing them is not difficult—especially if they benefit from such an undertaking—however will the old oligarchs, will the crony capitalists of Meghalaya allow the people to prosper? That will be the fight that matters.

## A Life Anchored in Simplicity

### The Legacy of Dr Ricky A.J. Syngkon

By Maitphang Syiem

"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." These words from the Apostle Paul in Philippians 1:21 refuse to remain mere ink on a page today; they stand as the living, breathing summary of a life that burned quietly, faithfully, and completely for Christ, for his people, and for the beloved land of Meghalaya. On what seemed like an ordinary evening under the familiar Shillong sky, time suddenly stood still on a simple football ground. What had begun as a joyous, friendly game among close companions transformed in a fleeting heartbeat into a tragedy that eternity itself would mark. Dr Ricky AJ Syngkon, the Member of Parliament representing the Shillong constituency and one of the state's vital voices in the Lok Sabha, collapsed while playing the sport he loved and never rose again.

Despite the frantic rush to the Mawiong Community Health Centre and subsequently to Dr H Gordon Roberts Hospital in Jaiaiw, the desperate efforts of the medical team could not save him. At just 54 years of age, his earthly journey came to a sudden halt.

The heartbreaking news swept like a biting, cold wind along the majestic ridges and plunging valleys of Shillong, carrying a heavy, suffocating blanket of disbelief, tears, and stunned silence into homes, streets, and quiet churches. Leaders across the political spectrum fumbled for words, for this loss felt palpably different; it was gentler, purer, and significantly harder to explain. Prime Minister Narendra Modi remembered him for his dedicated service to the people, mourning a life of true public service that ended far too soon. Meghalaya's Chief Minister, Conrad K Sangma, spoke of him as a "deeply dedicated, compassionate leader rooted firmly in faith, who served with an unwavering commitment to uplift society. In the hushed halls of the Assembly, where tributes were paid in profound silence, it felt as though the House inherently recognized it had lost more than just a parliamentarian; it had lost a rare spirit whose very presence made the cut-throat world of public life seem a little less harsh and profoundly more human."

Yet, to speak of Dr Ricky solely as a leader or an "Honourable MP" is to tell merely a sliver of his expansive, beautiful story. Long before he walked the corridors of power in Delhi, he was affectionately known as "Sir" in the classroom, "Preacher" behind the wooden pulpit, and simply "brother" in countless earnest conversations in villages across the state. In a modern age obsessed with relentless self-promotion, his humility was absolutely disarming. "I am who I am not because of me; it's all because of Him," he once told a congregation, introducing himself not as a powerful politician, but as a teacher who deeply loved to preach and teach the word of God. For his students, he was a dedicated guide who believed education was a divine calling rather than a mere career. As an evangelist, his sermons frequently spoke of direction, love, compassion, and unity as divine gifts that Christ offers to communities. In his online messages, he continuously reminded his listeners that Jesus is "the light of the world," urging them to let Scripture be "a lamp to our feet," to step away from the darkness, and to walk faithfully in the light of life.

These powerful messages were not abstract exhortations meant only for his flock; they were the very reflections of his own life choices. For years, he actively resisted the turbulent road of politics, deeply convinced that his rightful place was standing at the blackboard and serving as a "man of God" behind the pulpit. When he finally answered the political call in 2020, it was not the loud drumbeat of personal ambition that moved him, but a deepening, inescapable concern

for his beloved state. Even amidst the sweltering heat of election campaigns, he proudly testified that he preached the word of God directly from the political stage, finding his greatest joy when a non-believer came to faith at one of his rallies. He insisted that politics is "divine and ordained by God," demonstrating to all who heard him that knowledge without character is empty, but knowledge anchored in Christ possesses the power to truly transform a society.

When the Voice of the People Party (VPP) sent him to Parliament in 2024, his victory did not rely on the hollow echoes of loud slogans or the backing of expensive machinery. It rested solidly on a foundation of trust meticulously built over years of visibility, approachability, and quiet consistency. As a leader, he was widely described as a "gem" celebrated far more for his kind heart, warm smile, and unwavering love for the people than for his grand titles. The inherent power of his office never erected formidable walls; instead, it served to tear them down. He remained perpetually accessible, always ready to stop and listen whether he was walking on the street, worshipping in church, attending small village gatherings, or enjoying a twilight football match.

Most importantly, Dr Ricky viewed himself primarily as a servant of Christ temporarily placed in the complex arena of public life. He brought the sanctity of the pulpit into Parliament by consistently embodying core values: unflinching integrity, deep compassion, fairness, and a profound concern for the suffering. He was entirely unafraid to stand up and defend the vulnerable, powerfully condemning "deeply disturbing" and "unacceptable" incidents of vandalism against minorities. For him, faith was never merely a private, quiet decoration; it was a loud, public responsibility. Even as his public profile reached new heights, his day-to-day life remained defined by a disarming simplicity. Social media images remember him joyfully surrounded by ordinary citizens, insisting that all the glory for his "election miracles" belonged entirely to God.

Today, Meghalaya mourns with a grief that is raw and real, having lost a son of the soil, an MP, an evangelist, and a mentor. But for those who share his faith, this heavy grief does not stand alone; it is accompanied by the exact same hope he preached. Commentators often note that for the Apostle Paul, death was a "graduation to glory." For a devoted servant like Dr Ricky, whose mission was fuelled by the promise of eternity, we can find solace in trusting that his final breath on that beloved football field was not a tragic end, but rather a glorious entrance.

His life leaves behind a beautiful, essential pattern that our restless, highly aspirational generation desperately needs to observe. It is a pattern of remaining deeply grounded even when life forcibly pulls you upward. Even with the grand title of an MP, he deliberately chose the simple joys: playing football on a local ground, worshipping in ordinary churches, speaking to small village congregations, and listening far more than he ever spoke. As the mourning state lowers the body of Late Dr Ricky Andrew J. Syngkon into the fertile soil of the hills he loved so dearly, the urgent call from his sermons returns to us with renewed intensity: examine your path, choose unity, and walk in the light. To truly honour him requires more than our tears; it demands that we carry his steadfast testimony forward. We must strive to stay grounded, to choose profound simplicity, and to serve with the same quiet, steadfast humility, regardless of where life places us, until the day we, too, are called home.

## Letters to the Editor

### Gripped by a sense of helplessness

Editor,

We feel helpless at this great loss. Even as I write this and I look up to the night sky to admire it, instead all I have is a feeling of loss that is looming over the land. God has taken away the best of us tonight.

As an MP he has spoken on all the issues that his electorate has brought to bear upon him, from border security, to inclusion of Khasi in the 8th Schedule, from poor conditions of National Highways, to ILP, and every other pressing need of the day. One of his last works was to raise the issue of illegal acquisition of land by a cement company in Daistong Village, East Jaintia Hills, with the concerned Union Minister and asking for a total freeze of the environmental clearance for the same. May this last work be successful, for his legacy and for the people of Daistong village. We must ensure it as a state.

But apart from his Parliamentary duties, he was a preacher of the Gospel. One of his last sermons was delivered in Ri Bhoi, in January, 2026.

My first meeting with him was before he became M.P. and his first words to me, even though I was yet a stranger, was about how he needs to work on his fitness more. My last encounter with him was in NEIGRI-HMS, when he came to see a

relative. I greeted him as we both walked to our vehicles. I still remember my last sight of him. The MP had started his scooter engine, as he was holding his helmet in his hands. As I was driving past him, he stooped a bit lower for a better view as he waved goodbye with his ever poised and disarming smile.

Today I recall his first words about wanting to work on his fitness more, and then I learned that the last thing that he did was playing football.

To his closest supporters, he was already the best M.P. because of the qualities they saw in him and they were sure he would finish his full term, and accomplish many wonderful things. But we feel we have been robbed of a great legacy because the question now is: will he ever be remembered as one of our greatest M.P.s if he barely got to complete even 2 years of his term? Will his qualities which would have surely cemented his legacy, be forgotten in history?

God has surely taken away a real worker, both in politics and in the preaching of His word. We feel helpless at the will of God. We will miss him. He has left a void that will be hard to fill.

Yours etc.,  
Kitdor H. Blah,  
Shillong

### When loss feels personal

Editor,  
One of the most devastating news for me is that Ricky is no more. Dr. Ricky Syng-

kon, MP from the Shillong constituency, passed away on February 19th after a cardiac arrest. I was so close to him, and he was one of the younger politicians that I had so much hope for the welfare of the state of Meghalaya. In his short stint in the Lok Sabha, he had made an impact - he was active in raising important issues of the state in the parliament. He managed, even as a first timer, to impress Union Ministers of the failings in the various developmental projects of our state resulting in the central government taking action. We have lost a statesman, not just a politician.

I found him to be an intelligent person. I taught him while he did his Master's in Economics, though his background was in Commerce. He then went on to do his M.Com. Ultimately he shifted from St. Edmund's College where he taught, to join the Commerce Department of NEHU as a faculty. His Christian faith was very strong, and he always witnessed Christ through his life, and his sermons.

Rest in peace, Ricky. May God's comforting presence be with Wandri, Cliff, and Donnie and the spouses.

I will miss you, friend, I will!

Yours etc.,  
Eugene Thomas,  
Shillong -6

### Life's a fleeting blur

Editor,  
Life has a strange way of humbling us. We plan

in calendars, we dream in timelines, we believe in "next year" and "someday." We assume there will be another morning, another call, another chance to say what we postponed today. Then life reminds us that nothing is guaranteed. It is our state's profound loss that Ricky A. J. Syngkon has left for his heavenly abode so suddenly.

A distinguished academic with a Ph.D. in Economics and former Assistant Professor at North-Eastern Hill University, he stepped into public life with intellect, integrity, and quiet resolve. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, he won the Shillong parliamentary seat as a candidate of the Voice of the People Party, marking a significant political shift in Meghalaya. As a first-time Member of Parliament in the 18th Lok Sabha, he raised issues central to the Northeast, advocating for grassroots development and the preservation of indigenous identity, including the inclusion of the Khasi language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. His journey reflected courage, conviction, and an unwavering commitment to his people.

A routine moment can become a memory we did not know would be the last. We promise ourselves we will express love later, forgive later, begin later. Life is unpredictable, not to frighten us, but to awaken us. To remind us that time is not a possession; it is a privilege. That health is not permanent; it is a blessing. That relationships are not eternal; they are

gifts while they last. Let us live consciously, love loudly, apologise sincerely, and laugh with our whole heart. Life is but a fleeting blur between birth and death.

Yet within that fleeting blur, some lives leave a mark that time cannot erase. May we honour his memory by carrying forward the courage, dedication, and love for the land that he embodied.

Yours etc.,  
Shivani Pde,  
Via email

### Dr Ricky's Demise Deprives Us of an Empathetic Listener

Editor,

About the sudden and devastating demise of our Lok Sabha Member of Parliament (MP), Dr. Ricky Andrew J. Syngkon, I am compelled to share a side of his leadership that the public may not have fully seen, his unwavering commitment to the smallest voices and the most technical of regional grievances. While the state mourns a beloved political figure, I mourn a mentor who listened. Over the past year, I had the privilege of engaging in a deep, consistent dialogue with Dr. Syngkon regarding the restoration of The North Eastern Service (NES) Of Akashvani on shortwave radio. What struck me most was not just his intellectual grasp of these complex issues, but his accessibility.

Between our discussions on radio transmitters and regional radio identity, we shared moments that defined his character, warm greetings for Christmas and New Year, and his sincere wishes on my 17th birthday.

Just recently, a grievance appeal I filed was disposed of with the Ministry admitting my suggestion, regarding the stopping of the Akashvani FM Gold Delhi relay, was "practical and valuable." I was preparing to hand this "victory" to Dr. Syngkon to raise in the Lok Sabha. His sudden departure feels like a "blackout" of the very signal we were trying to strengthen. He was the "receiver" for the technical and cultural anxieties of not just the Khasi people but others. The best way to honour his memory is to ensure that the work he was looking into, the restoration of our regional identity on the airwaves, is not buried with him.

Dr. Syngkon proved that a leader could be a PHD holder and an MP, yet still have the humility to discuss the "ghost of centralisation" with a young radio enthusiast. May his soul rest in eternal peace, and may we, the people of Shillong and beyond, carry forward the frequency of his compassion and his dedication to the truth.

Yours etc.,  
Hamemanbha Lyngdoh  
Lawai  
Via email

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of *The Shillong Times*

# Almost half of antibiotic prescribing for surgery is possibly inappropriate

Inappropriate antibiotic prescribing around the time of surgery and long-term prescribing in aged care are among a mixed bag of findings of a recent report into antibiotic use and resistance in Australia.

The report shows while fewer antibiotics are prescribed in the community than a decade ago, there is still room to improve antibiotic prescribing in hospitals. We are both involved in antibiotic stewardship programs, primarily in hospitals, which aim to improve the use of antibiotics to improve patient care and reduce the potential for antimicrobial resistance.

Here's why antibiotic resistance is so concerning and what the latest report tells us.

## Why is antibiotic use and resistance important?

Factors driving antibiotic use tend to be different in hospitals and in the community.

In hospitals, there are more patients with infections, and these are also places where patients come to with resistant infections. Here, a common dilemma is making sure sick patients receive antibiotics quickly, balanced with not overusing them unnecessarily.

In the community, GPs often have to use careful clinical judgement to determine whether antibiotics are required, or if the patient will recover without them.

If we think of this issue at the level of individual patients, the risks may feel small. But at the population level, using the wrong antibiotic, or using it when it's not needed, or for too long increases the risk of antibiotic resistance. This is where bacteria become resistant to the usual treatment options, so infections may continue to progress despite treatment.

This occurs due to "selection pressure". This means the bacteria acquire changes that enable them to evade the effect of antibiotics, and these resistant strains continue to grow and spread.

Why are antibiotics used in surgery?

Antibiotics are mostly used around the time of surgery as one way to pre-



vent, rather than treat, an infection.

They are generally needed only for procedures where there is a higher risk of infection and for a short period (mostly a single dose before surgery or for up to 24 hours afterwards).

This report shows that just under half (42.7%) of antibiotic use for surgical procedures was not appropriate. The main areas that we need to work on are: 1. Only using antibiotics for surgery where there is a high risk of infection 2. The time we administer the antibiotic dose, ideally within an hour before the skin is cut 3. The choice of antibiotic — sufficient to cover the organisms that could cause infection, but not unnecessarily broad that it may cause side effects or antibiotic resistance.

Inappropriate antibiotic use in surgery may have several consequences.

Giving the antibiotic at the wrong time (too early, or too late) reduces its effectiveness. Giving it for surgery where there is a low risk of infection, or for too long unnecessarily exposes patients to the risk of antibiotic side effects such as diarrhoea, as well as increasing the risk of antibiotic resistance.

How about aged-care facilities?

The report shows residents of aged-care homes receive high amounts of antibiotics. Two striking statistics

were that four in five residents (79.5%) received at least one antibiotic prescription each year. About one in three patients (34.7%) were given an antibiotic for more than six months.

Aged-care residents are at a higher risk of developing infections and it can sometimes be harder to spot the signs and symptoms of an infection.

So using antibiotics to prevent infection can sometimes be appropriate but should be a last resort. This is because infections that "break through" to cause infection despite preventative antibiotics are more likely to be resistant.

## What else did the report find?

The report also included critical antimicrobial resistances. These microorganisms are a serious threat to some of our last-line antibiotics. These are very difficult to treat and require specialised antibiotics and medical care. The reported number of these organisms more than doubled from 2022, to 3,389, or more than nine cases each day, in 2024. The report also highlights that many of these organisms are acquired overseas, reinforcing the regional and global context of antibiotic resistance.

## What can we do to reduce antibiotic resistance?

We've previously written about

actions we can take to reduce antibiotic use.

This latest report reinforces that we should: 1. Raise awareness that many infections will get better by themselves, and don't necessarily need antibiotics 2. For aged-care residents, regularly review medications, including antibiotics, and check if they are still needed 3. Use the antibiotics we have more appropriately and for as short a time as possible, supported by appropriate oversight in hospitals, and at state and national levels 4. Continue to monitor for infections due to resistant bacteria to inform control policies 5. Reduce cross-transmission of resistant organisms in hospitals and in the community 6. Prevent infections by other means, such as clean water, sanitation, hygiene and vaccines 7. Continue to develop new antibiotics and alternatives to antibiotics, and ensure the right incentives are in place to encourage a continuous pipeline of new antibiotics.

## The wider context

This report is only one part of the picture of how and where antibiotics are used in Australia.

We have previously estimated that around 60% of antibiotics in Australia are used in animals.

This issue was highlighted by recent use of the antibiotic florfenicol in Tasmanian salmon farms. This is closely related to chloramphenicol, an antibiotic used in humans.

This reinforces the need to take a co-ordinated strategy across different sectors, an approach that has worked before in Australia.

There would also be benefits from responding to antibiotic resistance in a similar way to how we respond to other public health threats. So bringing the national response into the Australian Centre for Disease Control, which was launched officially at the start of 2026, should strengthen our efforts. (*The Conversation*)

Authored by Allen Cheng and Kelly Cairns, Monash University

# Ads are coming to AI. But is it a bad thing?

American artificial intelligence (AI) company Anthropic this month attracted applause — and a surge in users — for clever advertisements poking fun at its competition.

In the commercials, an AI assistant awkwardly breaks away mid-conversation to push products such as shoe insoles and dating services. "Ads are coming to AI", the Super Bowl-tied spots warned, but not to Anthropic's own chatbot Claude.

The campaign quickly generated buzz because it played to peoples' worries that inviting advertising into AI platforms which many of us now rely on — and confide in — risks blurring the line between helpful advice and paid influence.

But that anxiety, while understandable, overlooks how advertising already works across much of the digital world.

In many ways, ads based on our interactions with AI aren't such a big leap from the kinds of targeted advertising that 'already' dominate search engines, social media feeds and e-commerce platforms.

And if transparent and well-designed, the shift could help people complete tasks faster and keep these tools widely accessible.

## AI's access and equity headache

This month, OpenAI's ChatGPT began testing adverts with users in the United States. The company assures us any ads will be clearly labelled, kept separate from answers and accompanied by privacy protections and user controls.

The stakes are high: ChatGPT now boasts 800 million weekly users and ranks as the internet's fifth most visited website. It has operated largely ad-free since its launch three years ago and only about 5 per cent of users pay a subscription.

With room to grow, OpenAI has strong incentives to find a sustainable model that protects trust without undermining what made the service so popular.

If indeed transparent and optional, its advertising could help solve a basic funding problem. In practice, a small

paying group cannot carry the full burden forever.

A light, clearly labelled ad model is one way the wider user base could contribute indirectly — much as they already do via television, YouTube, search engines and many news websites. That matters for access.

## The convenience of 'contextual' advertising

For everyday ChatGPT users, the main upside of ads is that they can reflect what is needed in the moment, rather than what a tracker infers from past browsing.

Traditional digital ads use cookies and cross-site tracking to guess people's interests over time. Contextual advertising, by contrast, targets what is happening on the page or in the moment and is often seen as a more privacy-friendly alternative.

OpenAI says ads will be matched to the conversation and may use past chats and ad interactions. Users will be able to dismiss ads, see why they were shown one and delete ad data.

If those controls work as promised, relevance would come from the question being asked, not from tracking across other websites.

## Trust, transparency and limits

None of this removes the risks. Advertisements should not be allowed to change what a trusted AI tool such as ChatGPT recommends. And because ads are currently being tested with only a small group of users, the full extent of those risks cannot yet be observed or properly assessed.

That is why transparency and separation are not cosmetic. They are safeguards. For now, it may be tempting to treat "ad-free" as the only ethical position, as Anthropic's new campaign implies. But the world is still early in this shift.

If those guardrails hold, it is worth considering the upside too: ads in AI tools could support access, reduce friction and help more people benefit from this powerful technology. (*The Conversation*)

Authored by Ilayaraja Subramanian, University of Canterbury

## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, FEBRUARY 22, 2026

### 'Birthdate Forecast'

Moon semi-sextile Saturn on your solar return chart and it is going to be a very exciting year. It will be a very fortunate year. All plans will be completed. Projects which were pending would make headway. Lady luck will smile on you. You can enter a love relation with a very lovely person. There would be great understanding and bonding in the ties. And you would like to get married. Financial position would be stable. Those who were and thinking of starting some business could do so. Those appearing for interviews/ exams would be successful. Auspicious functions would take place at your home. There will be peaceful and joyous atmosphere. Near and dear ones will come closer. You will plan to buy a new house. Unemployed will get new jobs. You could also visit religious places and go on a pilgrimage. Contacts with officials would be established.

### 'This week for you'

**Aries : (March 21 - April 20)** It is going to be a challenging week ahead. You will make tough decisions at your workplace. You will also reverse some of the decisions that you took in haste. Your financial position will also start getting better. You will be focused and complete your work that was stalled with the help of dear ones. You will also do noble deeds and help people. Your respect in the social sphere will increase. The placement of Moon will bring happiness to your personal relations. You will have good relations with your mate and family members. You will respect their sentiments and feelings too. Your health also keeps improving. You will also take care of your parents and will understand their desires too.

**Taurus : (April 21 - May 21)** It is going to be a prestige enhancing week for you. Your stalled work will be completed. Your financial position will also get better. You will give importance to your colleagues and bosses. Meeting with some people will be meaningful. You will cross hurdles in your life and move ahead with confidence. Your views will be taken on a matter of vital importance. You will feel blissful and happy in the company of your mate. The time will be spent in bliss and happiness with family members. You will also get connected to new people. Your efficiency will be commendable. You will get the desired success. New contacts will be beneficial. You will gain in the long run.

**Gemini : (May 22 - June 21)** It is going to be a favorable week for you. You will get good results in your work. You will help others too. There will be challenges at work and on the personal front. You will try to adjust to the best of your abilities. Your problems will also get resolved. You will pay attention to your important work and start working on it. You will get the help of your bosses in achieving your objectives. There will be an increase in your knowledge. There will be some activity in marriage relations. You will take advice from your family members too. You will be meeting people too. Your social circle will get wide, and it will help you a lot. You will feel very positive and relaxed.

**Cancer : (June 22 - July 22)** There will be happiness in your personal ties this week. You will be free of domestic responsibilities and will pay attention to yourself. Your financial position will also get better. The youth will start enjoying themselves and relations between wife and husband will be cordial. You will also feel happy in the company of your family members. You will also meet new people who will be able to help you later. You will move ahead in matters of love. And your love life will be at its peak. You will try your best to fulfill the need for creativity at the workplace. You will also try your best to achieve what you desire. Your dreams will be fulfilled.

**Leo : (July 23 - August 23)** It is going to be a crucial week for you. You will face some new challenges and there will be losses in your business too. You will be able to resolve your differences with your friends. Disputes will arise in matters of property. You need to be careful while travelling. You will be able to get work out of your colleagues with a calm and patient behavior. A new and well thought decision will help you later. Works that had been stalled will gather momentum. The time will be very well spent in the company of your family members. You need to be self-disciplined. New creative pursuits will keep you busy. Your health will be good. Financial position will be strong.

**Virgo : (August 24 - September 22)** You may have a plan in your mind to start your life afresh. You will also look with great interest at the future of your children. You will also make best use of your capabilities and capacities. You will be able to fulfill your domestic as well as personal duties. You will also receive

important news. Your money and wealth will also increase. You will also get profits. You will also spend money wisely. You will feel relaxed and happy. The progress of work will be satisfactory. Your efforts will bring lot of money despite stiff competition. You will perform well. Those who are single can get suitable marriage proposals. And will be successful.

**Libra : (September 23 - October 23)** Your efforts will bring in lot of money. Despite stiff competition you will perform well. New job/business opportunities will keep coming. You will have good financial gains, and you will remain busy with your work. You will also spend your money wisely. Those in business should be alert in public dealings. You will also share good relationships with your spouse/partner. Your family will support you. You will also like meeting people. You will also get chances of investment. You will also carry out worldly activities very calmly. You will also use your capabilities in your career, profession, spirituality and religion. Students will focus entirely on their studies and will be able to concentrate much better.

**Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22)** There will be an increase in your income. It is a profitable time for those in government jobs and there will be promotion too. Your marital life will be great, and you can go out with someone close to you. You will also perform your work with lot of dedication. You will be full of courage, self-confidence and hope. You will also look after your health and fitness. You will also be focused on earning money. You will also feel what you want to do. You need to be self-controlled and self-disciplined. You will learn a new skill. You will try your best to obtain what you desire. And will be successful. And you will meet an influential person too who will help you a lot.

**Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21)** A dispute that has been going on for some time will get resolved. Possibility of a business journey is there. You will also be appreciated for your contribution to society and workplace. Your opponents will be active but not be able to harm you. It is difficult to recover money that is stuck somewhere. You will face business problems with confidence. The situation of income and expenditure will improve. You will also fall into some new romantic ties. Peace and harmony will prevail in family relations. You might have to make sudden changes because of priorities. Positive thinking will help in moving ahead at your workplace. Your bosses will be happy with your performance.

**Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20)** The week will start with money inflow. The couples will have cordial relations. They will help each other. You will also receive good news about your family. Your writ will run in your office, and you will establish your dominance with your hard work. You will share wonderful bonding with your mate. There will be peaceful atmosphere and calmness at home. People will take advice from you. Your financial position will be strong and stable. You will have a feeling of dedication. There will be struggle in your career which you will overcome with ease. You will not let your objective go out of sight. The students will utilize their time properly. They will get good results too.

**Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18)** Your worrisome time will come to an end. Your health will also improve. You will have heated arguments and disputes with someone at your workplace. Something said by people can hurt you. But you need to stay calm and positive. You will improve your lifestyle. You will also be enthusiastic towards something new. This is also the time for fulfillment of your desires. Your monetary position will be strong. You will have good bonding with your mate. Your behavior towards your children will be friendly. You will excel in your work. You will have to work hard to bring together your energy, firm determination and self-confidence. People close to you will help you a lot.

**Pisces : (February 19 - March 20)** The week will be full of events that will leave you surprised. You will also be able to make a separate identity for yourself based on your talent. Officials will be influenced by your style of working. It is a time to realize your dreams. There will be an improvement in the health of an elderly family member. Officials will be influenced by your style of work. It is time to realize your dreams. You will get relief from old problems. The atmosphere at home will improve. There are chances of getting rewards, bonuses and allowances. You will make progress in your life.

# Expert explains if couple's counselling is right for you

Should we do couples counselling? Are we happy? Are we both pulling in the same direction? How can we get our spark back? These kinds of questions are normal in a society that places such importance on coupledom, despite there being no handbook or one-size-fits all approach.

Many people seek out couples counselling when going through a rough patch, or wondering how to improve their relationship. And no doubt the hit show *Couples Therapy* has boosted public interest in this type of counselling.

So, how do you decide if it's right for you — and what should you expect?

## Should we get couples counselling?

Relationship satisfaction changes over time. Research shows even knowing this can help couples navigate the usual ups and downs of life together.

Some research also shows couples therapy can help lower relationship distress (which might include things such as frequent arguments or feeling dissatisfied in your relationship).

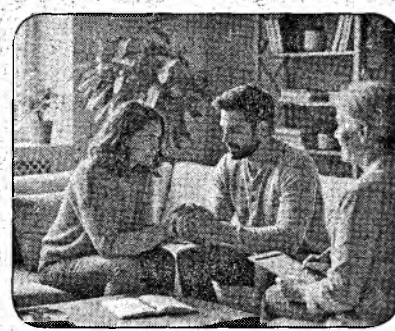
It may be suitable for some couples who want to work through infidelity or stressors such as caregiving responsibilities.

Others may seek out preventative couples counselling, which is focused on finding ways to improve communications before your relationship reaches crisis point.

Does it work? Well, some research has found certain types of counselling did help cut the divorce rate among newlyweds — but so too did getting couples to simply watch romance movies together and discuss the themes with their partner.

Overall, much depends on your motivation for seeking counselling and the mindset you're bringing to it. Ask yourself: what do I want to work on, and what do I hope to achieve? If your goal is to get someone to "take your side", counselling may not help. A good couples counsellor should remain neutral, and they're not there to take sides.

Many who seek couples counselling do so because they're arguing and disagreeing a lot with their partner. If that's you, it might help to let go of notions about who is "right" and move



a partner with depression. These are complex structural issues.

It's also unclear how long the benefits of couples counselling last. One study noted "many distressed couples benefit during relationship education courses but that these benefits decline when the program ends."

## How do people choose a counsellor?

There's a wide range of therapeutic techniques.

One famous approach is called the Gottman method, where couples focus on things such as creating "love maps" recording what you know about your partner, nurturing fondness, turning toward each other instead of away and solving problems.

Famously, the Gottman approach also identifies the "four horsemen" of a relationship apocalypse: criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling.

Other couples counsellors will take more of a psychological or psychoanalytical approach, informed by techniques such as cognitive behavioural therapy.

Relationships Australia provides a range of services including relationship counselling.

At the end of the day what matters most is that you and your couples counsellor "click"; if you don't get with yours, it's OK to find a new one.

## Love is about doing

It can be helpful to use American author bell hooks' idea of love as a practice of "doing" rather than a passive "being". In other words, love is about doing things (for each other, together, or for yourself to fuel your relationship) rather than just about "being in love".

Couples in long-term, contented relationships engage in day-to-day love practices, such as making a coffee for your partner, or watching a show together.

So, consider snuggling up on the couch with your partner to watch something together. Perhaps even Couples Therapy can provide a healthy prompt to reflect on and appreciate one another in a new light. (*The Conversation*)

Authored by Priscilla Dunk-West, Victoria University

# Why Australia should consider regulating blind box toys for children



If you walk through any major shopping mall in Australia, chances are you'll encounter products and experiences that are uncomfortably similar to gambling—yet they are available to anyone, including children.

Our soon-to-be-published research has found claw machines, blind boxes and toy capsule machines have become pervasive in the spaces families frequent— from the shops, to the movies, to the pub.

We call these products and experiences gamble-play media. They rely on and profit from risk-taking, and encourage intense, continuous playful consumption in the quest to "win" a desired item.

While claw machines have been a part of Australia's consumer culture for a long time, blind boxes are the most recent gamble-play media to become mainstream.

In Singapore, lawmakers and consumer advocates are pushing to regulate blind boxes due to the gambling inducement risks they carry, according to a written address to parliament from Home

Affairs Minister Kasiviswanathan Shanmugam.

It may be time for Australia to contemplate a similar move, given our nation's insidious gambling culture and tendency towards problem gambling.

Indeed, gambling among children has become a national crisis, with a report from the Australia Institute highlighting 30 per cent of 12-17 year-olds gamble at least once per year.

## The blind box phenomenon

Blind boxes are products (usually toys) sealed in opaque packaging. The contents can't be revealed until after a box is purchased.

Most are sold as part of larger collections, many of which contain coveted "rare" items. Buyers are enticed to pay for the chance to obtain these "high-value" items.

Globally, blind boxes are projected to reach annual profits of USD 24.2 billion (about AUD 34 billion) by 2033.

Anyone who visits a major shopping precinct will likely see rows upon rows of boxes

displaying Labubus (a multi-billion-dollar obsession), Sanrio characters, and other collectibles from children's or family franchises such as Sesame Street, Harry Potter, Toy Story and the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Japanese characters such as Mofusand and Sonny Angels are particularly appealing to Gen Z and Gen Alpha buyers.

Online, content creators use these products in "toy unboxing" videos, which have long been popular on platforms such as YouTube and TikTok.

This content focuses on the tactile pleasures of unwrapping toys, particularly "surprise" toys—the crinkling of paper, the tapping of nails on boxes, and the caressing of the treasured item once it's finally unveiled.

There are hundreds of thousands of videos of influencers unboxing blind box toys across YouTube, TikTok and Instagram, many of which help to generate hype around new products or high-profile collaborations.

Apart from major retailers such as Pop Mart and Miniso,

blind boxes are also available in vending machines, and pop-up and bargain variety stores (which may stock knock-off versions).

## Gambling for children?

The emotional states triggered by blind boxes are not dissimilar to those experienced by people who gamble on slot machines or pokies: anticipation, randomness, occasional joy and frequent disappointment. These experiences can become addictive.

Blind boxes are designed to offer a rush over the possibility of an (unlikely) big win, and the subsequent churning of this feeling.

As our research highlights, these are the dynamics of gamble-play.

There are preliminary indications that using gamble-play devices such as claw machines and coin pushers in the formative years can lead to problems with gambling in adulthood.

However, more research is needed to understand how children's experience risk, randomness, and loss and reward mechanisms in the context of seemingly innocuous gamble-play products.

Our ongoing research explores if and how gamble-play can be a gateway to adult gambling.

Some manufacturers list the odds of winning and age guidelines in small print on the boxes.

For instance, they may include a label suggesting the product is not for children under 8, or under 12. But these labelling practices are inconsistent, unclear and unregulated.

The reason some blind boxes are labelled this way is because of industry guidelines in China, from where many of these products are

imported.

Since 2023, China has restricted the sale of blind boxes to children under 8. Nonetheless, concerns around blind box addiction among China's children persist.

## Singapore sets an example

Singaporean legislators and consumer advocates are moving to regulate blind boxes, arguing they are too similar to gambling.

The proposed laws are still being devised. It's unclear whether they will fall under existing gambling laws or require new legislation— but they could include mandating that manufacturers clearly disclose the odds of getting each product, and apply and enforce age restrictions.

Blind boxes have even started making small waves in Australian politics.

In June of last year, Victorian Legislative Council member Aiv Puglielli said: "instead of buying one, maybe you buy two or three, increasing your chances of securing the design that you want."

It kind of sounds like gambling, because it is gambling.

Randomised rewards are not exclusive to the blind box market: they are also used as incentives by fast food chains and supermarkets. In some cases, items such as rare Woolworths' Disney Goshies can be resold for thousands.

Australian legislators have already moved to regulate and classify gambling-like content in video games, such as loot boxes and simulated gambling.

Blind boxes and other gamble-play media rely on the same mechanisms of seduction— and therefore also demand scrutiny. (The Conversation)

# Scientists reveal how exercise protects brain from Alzheimer's

Exercise may sharpen the mind by repairing the brain's protective shield.

Researchers found that physical activity prompts the liver to release an enzyme that removes a harmful protein, causing the blood-brain barrier to become leaky with age.

In older mice, dialling down this protein reduced inflammation and improved memory. The discovery points to a surprising body-to-brain pathway that could inspire new Alzheimer's therapies.

Researchers at UC San Francisco have identified a biological process that may explain why exercise sharpens thinking and memory. Their findings suggest that physical activity strengthens the brain's built-in defence system, helping protect it from age-related damage.

As people grow older, the blood-brain barrier becomes more fragile. This tightly packed network of blood vessels normally shields the brain from harmful substances circulating in the bloodstream.

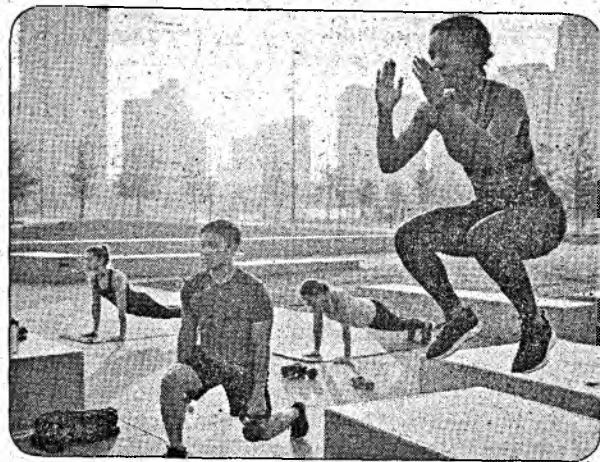
Over time, however, it can become leaky, allowing damaging compounds to enter brain tissue. The result is inflammation, which is linked to cognitive decline and is commonly seen in disorders such as Alzheimer's disease.

Several years ago, the research team discovered that exercising mice produced higher levels of an enzyme called GPLD1 in their livers. GPLD1 appeared to rejuvenate the brain, but there was a mystery.

The enzyme itself cannot cross into the brain, leaving scientists unsure how it delivers its cognitive benefits.

## The new research provides an answer

**How GPLD1 Reduces Brain Inflammation:** The scientists found that GPLD1



influences another protein known as TNAP. As mice age, TNAP builds up in the cells that form the blood-brain barrier.

This buildup weakens the barrier and increases leakiness. When mice exercise, their livers release GPLD1 into the bloodstream.

The enzyme travels to the blood vessels surrounding the brain and removes TNAP from the surface of those cells, helping restore the barrier's integrity.

"This discovery shows just how relevant the body is for understanding how the brain declines with age," said Saul Villeda, PhD, associate director of the UCSF Bakar Aging Research Institute.

Villeda is the senior author of the paper, which was published in the journal *Cell* on February 18. Pinpointing TNAP's Role in Cognitive Decline. To determine how GPLD1 exerts its effects, the team focused on what the enzyme does best. GPLD1 cuts specific proteins from the surface of cells.

Researchers searched for tissues containing proteins that could serve as targets and suspected that some of these proteins might accumulate with age. Cells in the blood-brain barrier stood out because they carried several possible GPLD1 targets.

When the scientists tested these proteins in the lab, only one was trimmed by GPLD1:

TNAP.

Further experiments confirmed TNAP's importance. Young mice genetically modified to produce excess TNAP in the blood-brain barrier showed memory and cognitive problems similar to those seen in older animals.

When researchers reduced TNAP levels in 2-year-old mice— which are the equivalent of 70 human years—the blood-brain barrier became less permeable, inflammation decreased, and the animals performed better on memory tests.

"We were able to tap into this mechanism late in life, for the mice, and it still worked," said Gregor Bieri, PhD, a postdoctoral scholar in Villeda's lab and co-first author of the study.

## Implications for Alzheimer's and Brain Ageing

The findings suggest that developing medications capable of trimming proteins such as TNAP could offer a new strategy to restore the blood-brain barrier, even after it has been weakened by ageing.

"We're uncovering biology that Alzheimer's research has largely overlooked," Villeda said. "It may open new therapeutic possibilities beyond the traditional strategies that focus almost exclusively on the brain," added Villeda. (ANI)

## No official holiday yet Shillong...

(Contd from P-1) In Khliehriat, the Jaintia National Council (JNC) Khliehriat Circle, led by president Shanborlang Bamon, shut down seven banks in East Jaintia Hills. The council stated the move was necessitated by the institutions' failure to observe the state mandate honoring the late MP, who passed away on February 19.

Simultaneously, the Meghalaya People United Front (MPUF) intervened in West Jaintia Hills after discovering the State Bank of India (SBI) Phramer Branch was operational. MPUF members confronted the branch manager, demanding immediate compliance with the government notification before forcing the facility to close.

The organisations maintained that the holiday was a formal period of mourning intended to allow citizens to pay their final respects. They argued that the banks' decision to stay open disregarded both government orders and the regional sentiment surrounding Dr. Syngkon's passing.

## BJP leader opens school in EKH...

(Contd from P-1) raises significant questions regarding administrative ethics and the institution's long-term agenda.

Beyond the opening, Deodhar is now soliciting public donations to fund ongoing activities aimed at halting religious conversions across the state.

## 88 nations back AI for All...

(Contd from P-1) Other deliverables are AI workforce development playbook and reskilling principles (supports AI skilling, reskilling, and literacy, and prepares nations for an AI-driven economy); and guiding principles on resilient and efficient AI (with focus on energy-efficient AI systems, and supported by a playbook on AI infrastructure resilience).

The Declaration also emphasises on energy-efficient AI systems and resilient infrastructure, recognising rising demands of AI places on power and natural resources.

Voluntary Guiding Principles on Resilient, Innovative and Efficient AI, alongside a Playbook on AI Infrastructure Resilience, were acknowledged as reference frameworks.

As per the official release, participants reaffirmed their commitment to advancing shared global priorities in AI governance; promoting voluntary, non-binding frameworks; and translating vision into action through continued collaboration.

The broad-based endorsement -- cutting across advanced economies, developing nations and multilateral bodies -- signals growing convergence around responsible and inclusive AI governance, with the summit positioning India as a key convenor in shaping the global AI agenda.

While earlier global gatherings, including the UK's AI Safety Summit at Bletchley Park (2023), the Seoul Summit (2024), and the Paris meet (2025) placed significant emphasis on frontier risks, safety guardrails and voluntary commitments, India widened the lens to foreground AI's developmental impact and real-world applications that can drive economic growth, social inclusion and sustainability. In essence, People, Planet and Progress.

At the AI Action Summit in Paris in February 2025, 61 nations, including India, China, France, Germany, and the African Union, were signatories to the declaration prioritising safe, ethical, open, and inclusive AI development.

The India AI Summit featured a blockbuster lineup of CEOs headlined by Google's Sundar Pichai, OpenAI's Sam Altman, Microsoft's Brad Smith and Anthropic's Dario Amodei, as discussions spanned most intensely-debated global topics in tech universe, from AI's opportunities and risks, all the way to AGI, governance and the future of jobs.

The collective presence of these influential tech voices under one roof, elevated the Summit proceedings to a centre of gravity for global tech deliberations throughout the week. The first global AI summit to be hosted in the Global South, the event saw India -- which has consistently championed the voice of developing economies in digital policy forums -- push for equitable access to AI resources and fair rule-making.

The AI Impact Summit secured investment commitments of over USD 250 billion in infrastructure with Vaishnav on Friday terming it a "grand success".

Vaishnav had said participation at the summit crossed five lakh visitors, reflecting strong domestic and global engagement with India's AI push. The India AI Impact Summit brought together global policymakers, industry leaders and technology experts, with India positioning itself as a key player in international discussions on AI governance and infrastructure development.

Be it the ministerial dialogue, the leaders' plenary, the main inauguration function, or the Summit overall, the quality of participation and dialog was phenomenal, Vaishnav had said.

The investment pledges crossed USD 250 billion for infra-related capital and about USD 20 billion on the VC/deep tech investments.

Vaishnav had said the Summit reflected the world's confidence in India's role in the new AI age. (PTI)

## Cal HC CJ holds SIR meeting following SC order, cancels judicial officers' leaves

KOLKATA, Feb 21: The Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court on Saturday ordered cancellation of leave of all judicial officers posted in different courts of West Bengal till March 9, to ensure compliance with directions passed by the Supreme Court for completion of special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in the state.

As per the direction of the Supreme Court, the High Court's Chief Justice Sujoy Paul held a meeting with various top officials of the central and state governments.

A notification issued by the high court's registrar general said that all leaves, except under medical emergency, granted earlier to any judicial officer, stand cancelled till March 9, and those already on leave were directed to join their respective courts and offices by February 23.

The high-level meeting of the Chief Justice was attended by West Bengal's chief electoral officer, and the state's chief secretary, home secretary, DGP, advocate general, additional solicitor general representing the Centre and the registrar general at the high court premises on Saturday

afternoon.

The notification said that the Chief Justice directed that all judicial officers, posted as district and sessions judges/chief judges, additional district and sessions judges, as well as those posted on deputation, are refrained from taking any leave with immediate effect till March 9.

It said that in addition to this, the judicial officers posted in special/CBI courts, commercial courts, special court for trial of criminal cases against MPs and MLAs, POCSO courts, City Civil Court and City Sessions Court of the city, and fast track courts are also refrained from taking any leave during this period except under medical emergencies.

The notification further said that all the judicial officers of the said ranks, who are under order of transfer and have accordingly delivered charge of their court and office in the meantime, will be deemed to be released from present posting with effect from February 23 and will join their respective new assignments by February 24, without availing transit

leave.

Disayed over the ongoing tussle between the West Bengal government and the Election Commission, the Supreme Court on Friday issued an "extraordinary" direction to deploy serving and former district judges to assist the poll panel in the controversy-ridden SIR process in the state.

The apex court ordered deputation of judicial officers for adjudication of claims and objections of those who are put under the logical discrepancy lists and facing removal of their names from the electoral rolls.

Logical discrepancies in progeny linking with the 2002 voter list include instances of a mismatch in the parent's name and the age difference between a voter and their parent being less than 15 years or more than 50 years.

The top court asked Calcutta High Court Chief Justice Sujoy Paul to spare some judicial officers and find former judges to assist in the SIR work, as it took serious note of the state government not sparing enough grade 'A' officers for the revision exercise. (PTI)

## Agatha honoured with...

(Contd from P-3) union ministers alongside her sustained contributions to public discourse and inclusive development.

Over the decades, Sangma's contributions have reflected a commitment to responsible governance, institutional strengthening, and equitable growth. Her leadership has been characterised by resilience, inclusivity, and a deep dedication to public service.

It may be mentioned that the Distinguished Public Leadership Award is a non-competitive honour intended to acknowledge sustained national contribution and enduring public leadership over time.

The ceremony was attended by policymakers, industry leaders, members of civil society and distinguished guests from across the country.

## ANTF confiscates suspected heroin...

(Contd from P-3) During the operation, the team intercepted a Maruti 800 vehicle bearing registration number ML-05-K-7414. Upon conducting a search in accordance with due legal procedures, two plastic boxes containing suspected heroin were recovered from the possession of the accused. The total weight of the seized contraband was 22.14 grams.

The accused, along with the seized contraband and the vehicle, has been handed over to Mawlai Police Station for further investigation and necessary legal action.

Police said further investigation is under way, and efforts are being made to examine forward and backward linkages to determine any possible inter-state nexus connected to the case.

## Speeding car kills food delivery rider in Delhi

NEW DELHI, Feb 21: An allegedly speeding car killed a 25-year-old delivery rider who was working on a night shift early Saturday in west Delhi's Tilak Nagar, police said.

Hem Shankar was the sole breadwinner who held the household together.

The car driver, identified as 27-year-old Mohit Kumar, has been taken into custody, police said.

The police said that around 3.30 am, they received a phone call about a crash on the Najafgarh-Rajouri Garden Road, near the Subhash Nagar Metro station. At the crash site, they found mangled remains of an e-scooter and a wrecked Hyundai Verna.

The Raghubir Nagar resident had already been rushed to Deen Dayal Upadhyay Hospital, where doctors declared him dead, a police officer said. Preliminary inquiry and eyewitness accounts indicated that a car allegedly rammed the scooter from behind.

The accused, a resident of Najafgarh who works as an MCD contractor, was detained at the spot and his vehicle seized, Deputy Commissioner of Police (West) Darade Sharad Bhaskar said.

Hem, called Rohit by family members, had been working as a delivery rider for nearly four years. He earned around Rs 25,000-Rs 30,000 a month and often took night shifts to earn an additional Rs 3,000-Rs 4,000, relatives said.

The police said a case has been registered and further investigation is underway. (PTI)

## NEHU VC felicitated for...

(Contd from P-3) traditions, Jyotish, Vastu Shastra and Yoga.

"Each day of the proceedings was dedicated to spiritual luminaries—Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Sri Ma Sarada and Swami Vivekananda—whose teachings continue to influence philosophical and cultural thought," the statement said.

The event was attended by prominent personalities, including public officials, jurists, university leaders, diplomats and scholars from India and abroad.

Addressing the attendees, speakers emphasised the importance of safeguarding classical intellectual traditions whilst encouraging research that connects ancient wisdom with contemporary challenges.

Meanwhile, organisers described the conference as a significant platform for scholarly exchange as they reiterated their dedication to promoting oriental studies through future academic initiatives and collaborations.

## Activist seeks re-evaluation...

(Contd from P-3) Upon seeking information, the group received a reply from the Veterinary department that stated that no such checkpoints were found within the district.

UHM president, P Suchiang, said that the group had already lodged complaints about the illegal smuggling of cattle to Bangladesh. However, the activity is still continuing, which, according to Suchiang, has led to a shortage of beef and an increase in its price within the state.

He further stated that the organisation strongly condemned the matter and urged the government to immediately stop this illegal trade.

The UHM also made it clear that if the authorities fail to curb the activity, it will be compelled to take necessary action.

"If you want a quality, act as if you already had it."

— William James

## The Shillong Times

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### AI summit, a dampener

THE high-profile India AI Impact Summit in the national capital hosted by entities of the central government was a step in the right direction. Yet, bad blood crept in, shaming the nation, its sense of integrity questioned at the most inopportune moment. Notably, this being the second such summit, world technology giants' attention was majorly riveted to the Bharat Mandapam. Many global institutions graced the summit, looking around for opportunities in India and beyond to take their own initiatives in AI forward. India is uniquely placed with its huge talent pool and the vast market that technology could explore. But the dampener came in the form of massive adverse publicity -- from what a pretentious professor of Galgotias University from Uttar Pradesh chose to project -- that a robot dog on display there was the "creation" of her institution, while word went round that it the product of the Chinese firm, Unitree. That her claim was transmitted by no less than the official media channel Doordarshan too is no small matter.

India's academic community generally maintains a high sense of dignity even in a world of chaos and confusion. Yet, we are nowhere nearer to the chimes of Nalanda and Taxila, the illustrious institutions of knowledge, learning and research for centuries down the line. The sprouting of a large number of academic institutions across states in recent decades tells a different tale. They are poorly equipped -- and are a pale shadow of the past. The Galgotias University, founded on the banks of the Yamuna in 2011 by a private entity, has been caught in allegations of fraud, forgery and much else. What's also not a secret is its publication of a research paper in the Covid-19 context -- that the killer virus could be annihilated by sound vibrations from a Thali -- akin to what Prime Minister Narendra Modi attempted and drew ridicule in those days. The academic community as a whole hung their head in shame. All these, however, are symptomatic of the times we are in. India's founding fathers encouraged the spirit of inquiry and excellence. Today, Indian universities rarely figure in the global list of the top 100. The degeneration is spectacular and spans all fields.

Acts of corruption, deceit, nepotism are sabotaging the old, well-established systems. Wrong indulgences are eating into the vitals of the systems. Corruption is gripping the systems like cancer. Truth is often a casualty. Those who mesmerize the world with hollow speeches carry the crowd with them. Politicians and bureaucrats vie with each other to loot the national exchequer. Under the circumstances, moneybags get away with their act. Regulations governing the universities are flouted. Academic recruitments are plagued by nepotism. Merit is swept under the carpet. The quality of education suffers. India is home to one-fifth of the world's population and the world's third largest economy. But the society vegetates due to wayward governance. Some 50 per cent of the population is famished; they own just three per cent of the national wealth. The strength of the West, the superpowers, were built on the strength of their systems. Whither India?

### Letters to the Editor

### A community responsibility we can no longer ignore

Editor,

The recent tragic passing of our beloved Dr. Ricky A. J. Syngkon, Member of Parliament from our State, reportedly due to cardiac arrest, has left the people of Meghalaya in shock and deep sorrow. Beyond the grief and condolences, however, this incident compels us to reflect on a pressing question: Could timely intervention by trained bystanders have made a difference?

Sometimes as a layperson I wonder whether certain lives can be saved or certain deaths can be prevented, if at the critical moment between life and death, an intervention can be made or tried. An intervention in the form of administering basic life-saving procedures as per the medical situation.

What if those fellow players with Dr. Ricky Syngkon at the time he suffered cardiac arrest knew how to administer CPR and followed certain Do's and Don'ts at the spot while waiting for professional medical assistance to arrive or on the way to a health care facility which can significantly improve the survival rate. I believe CPR is one of the initial procedures administered in case of Cardiac Arrest amongst other things (Medical Experts can correct me if I am wrong in this case). By knowing certain basic life-saving skills, I believe some lives can be saved because during these moments, time is very critical -- the time between the cardiac arrest until the time medical

help arrives or till the time the patient reaches a hospital. This 'in between' time is very crucial. It decides the fate of the suffering person. It is during these precious minutes that bystander intervention can prove decisive.

This tragedy, along with other untimely deaths we have witnessed in recent years, highlights the urgent need for widespread awareness and training in basic life-saving skills among the general public. CPR, for example and knowledge of essential Do's and Don'ts during medical emergencies are not skills that should be confined to healthcare professionals alone. They are skills that ordinary citizens can and should learn. People should be taught these skills; they will come in handy and be very useful when such situations arise.

For this to happen, a holistic approach is required involving everyone's participation and collaboration, right from Government Departments like Health, Police, Home Guards, SDRF, etc., and schools, colleges and the community as a whole. Training programmes can be designed and implemented in collaboration with Government Departments.

At the community level, institutions such as the Dorbar Shnongs can play a pivotal role by organising training sessions for residents. Community halls and local gatherings can serve as practical platforms for demonstrations and workshops. When knowledge is shared collectively, confidence grows collectively.

Schools and colleges should incorporate basic life-support training into their curriculum. Young people, in particular, can quickly grasp

# Coal Mining Conundrum in Meghalaya

By H.H. Mohrmen

Over the years, coal mining in Meghalaya, which is also known as rat-hole mining, has been in the news but for all the wrong reason. Acid mine drainage from these mines has polluted rivers, forests have been degraded, and tragic accidents have claimed workers' lives. This particular system of mining has been associated with serious violations of mining, labour, and environmental laws.

The State Government collects royalty on coal transported to other states and even international markets. Yet concerns persist regarding enforcement of safety norms, environmental safeguards, and legal compliance. Complaints regarding violations often remain unaddressed, and environmental damage continues to affect communities downstream. Very unfortunately, recently the Governor, in his address in the august House, mentioned the loss of livelihood due to the ban on coal mining but remained silent on the loss of livelihood of the people who live downstream and, more importantly, the damage that has affected the rivers.

### The absence of law or weakness of enforcement

Despite the mining ban, coal mining continues unabated, and this raises a fundamental question: Is the problem the absence of law, or the absence of enforcement? The narrative often presented is that Meghalaya's special constitutional status and unique land tenure system allow individuals and communities to mine coal as they wish. The interpretation that coal in Meghalaya was completely exempted has been debated. However, the legal position is far more complex than it is often made out to be.

It is true the state has a unique land tenure system, where land ownership is largely community or clan-based. It is often argued that this system gives people rights over minerals beneath their land and that coal in Meghalaya was exempted from nationalization. However, Paragraph 9 of the Sixth Schedule explicitly mentions the need for licenses or leases for prospecting and extraction of minerals.

### Legal Requirements for Mining in India

Mining operations in India are primarily governed by the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act (MMDR Act), 1957. Section 4(1) of this Act clearly prohibits mining of any mineral without a valid lease granted under the law. The Act also provides for the following: a Reconnaissance Permit, which is granted for preliminary prospecting of minerals through regional, aerial, geo-

physical, or geo-chemical surveys and geological mapping. Later a Prospecting License, which is granted for exploring, locating, or proving mineral deposits; and finally, a Mining Lease, which is mandatory for the actual extraction of minerals. It provides that no mineral, including coal, can be legally mined without complying with these statutory requirements.

Coal mining in India was nationalized in 1973 under the Coal Mines (Nationalisation) Act. The intention was clear: to bring coal resources under state control for systematic development, worker safety, and national interest. Yet, decades later, the issue of coal mining in Meghalaya continues to generate confusion, debate, and controversy, particularly on the question of whether central mining laws apply to this Sixth Schedule State. Beyond mining laws, coal extraction is also subject to India's environmental protection regime.

The Environment (Protection) Act serves as umbrella legislation empowering the central government to regulate pollution and set environmental standards. Under this framework, mining projects require environmental clearance and adherence to strict conditions. Hence coal mining in Meghalaya is also governed by several environmental protection laws in India, such as the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974. This Act aims to prevent and control water pollution and maintain water quality standards. It establishes Central and State Pollution Control Boards with regulatory powers. Then there is the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Cess Act, 1977, which imposes a cess on water-consuming industries to support pollution control efforts.

There is also the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981, which was enacted for the prevention and control of air pollution and sets standards for emissions. The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, is an umbrella legislation enacted after the Bhopal gas tragedy. It empowers the central government to regulate environmental pollution and coordinate enforcement of environmental standards.

The next legal framework applicable to coal mining in Meghalaya is the Indian Forest Act, 1927, which governs the protection and management of forests. Then there is the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, which regulates the diversion of forest land for non-forest purposes and re-

### Environmental Protection Laws

quires central approval. Other legal statutes applicable to coal mining include the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, which provides protection to wildlife and regulates protected areas. The Biological Diversity Act, 2002, is another important legal framework enacted to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of biological resources.

### The Labour laws

Article 21 of the Constitution grants the right to life to every citizen of the state, and it stipulates that not only the right of the coal mine owner is guaranteed, but also that of the labourer and the people downstream who are affected by acid water. The rights of the labourers, including the miners, are also governed by multiple and elaborate labour laws.

Thus, the idea that Meghalaya is completely exempt from national mining regulation does not stand on firm legal ground. These are not optional requirements; they are mandatory. No mineral, including coal, can be legally mined in India without complying with these provisions.

### Traditional livelihood activity

It is frequently argued that because individuals or clans own land, they automatically own the minerals beneath it, and therefore coal mining is a customary practice exempt from national control. The truth, however, is different. It is also worth noting that coal mining in Meghalaya was introduced during the British colonial period and was not an entirely indigenous practice from ancient times. It was not an ancient indigenous practice but a commercial activity that evolved over time.

The most important tool in the mining of coal is the pickaxe. While we have Khasi names for the plough, machete, and axe, which farmers use in agriculture, there is no Khasi word for pickaxe. Though iron smelting was an important activity of the people, it has been found that blacksmiths used charcoal and not coal to smelt iron in the past. Therefore, describing coal mining solely as a customary tradition oversimplifies history and ignores the truth and traditional practices.

### Sixth Schedule: Autonomy and Accountability

Meghalaya is governed under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, which grants autonomy to tribal areas through Autonomous District Councils. The state's land tenure system is indeed unique, with community and clan ownership playing a central role. However autonomy under the

Sixth Schedule is not a licence for lawlessness. It is a constitutional mechanism designed to protect tribal identity and local governance. But constitutional autonomy coexists with national responsibility.

Coal mining is an important livelihood activity of the people but environmental degradation does not respect district boundaries. River pollution flows downstream. Air pollution crosses jurisdictions. When forests are destroyed, the consequences are ecological and generational. The debate on coal mining in Meghalaya must therefore move beyond slogans of exemption and customary rights. The issue is not whether laws exist, they in fact clearly do. The issue is whether we have the political will and administrative integrity to enforce them.

### Role of the State Government

The future of Meghalaya's environment and its people depends not on ambiguity, but on clarity, responsibility, and respect for the rule of law. The crux of the matter is regulatory enforcement and governance and the State Government plays a critical role in regulating mining activities. However, it has often been observed that the government collects royalty on coal transported to other states and international markets, but fails to enforce rules and laws.

It is also true that complaints regarding violations of mining and environmental laws have not always resulted in effective action. Environmental damage to forests and rivers, as well as human rights concerns relating to mine workers have not been adequately addressed.

While Meghalaya enjoys constitutional autonomy under the Sixth Schedule and follows a unique land tenure system, this autonomy does not nullify the applicability of central mining and environmental laws. The requirement for licenses, leases, environmental clearances, and safety compliance remains mandatory.

Coal mining in Meghalaya, therefore, must operate within the framework of national legislation. The challenge lies not in the absence of laws, but in their enforcement. Sustainable mining practices, environmental safeguards, and protection of workers' rights are essential if coal extraction is to continue without causing irreversible ecological and social damage.

Festivals are another major concern. After celebrations, many public places are left polluted with waste scattered everywhere. Similarly, concerts and large public gatherings contribute significantly to environmental damage when proper waste management measures are not enforced. Shillong, known for its vibrant music culture and frequent concerts, must ensure that event organizers and attendees take responsibility for maintaining cleanliness.

We must safeguard our halls, streets, and public spaces so that visitors and locals alike do not dirty, pollute, or damage the natural beauty of Meghalaya.

Clear posters, banners, and signboards should be displayed to remind citizens and tourists to maintain cleanliness and respect the environment.

We need to wake up and act. Only through strict regulations, public awareness, and collective responsibility can we build a cleaner, healthier, and more beautiful nation.

Thanking you,  
Dr B R Laitphlang,  
Via email

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### Drastic Steps Needed for Cleaning Our Surroundings

Editor,

Cleanliness of our surroundings is an issue that must be viewed from a broader perspective. It is no longer just a local concern but a national responsibility. The Government of India must introduce stricter laws and enforceable policies against littering, spitting, and indiscriminate disposal of waste in public places.

Garbage is often thrown carelessly on sidewalks, footpaths, roadsides, and even from moving vehicles. In many areas, household waste and commercial waste generated by shops are dumped directly onto streets, riverbeds, and waterfalls. Such practices not only damage the environment but also reflect a

serious lack of civic sense. It is time for stricter enforcement. Without clear laws, penalties, and fines, meaningful behavioural change is unlikely. Civic sense cannot develop through awareness alone; accountability is equally necessary. If we truly want to see a clean and beautiful India, people must understand that public spaces belong to everyone and must be respected.

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## Remembering Dr. Ricky Syngkon

# Clean Politics and an Unfinished Journey

By Divesh Ranjan

There are moments in a state's political journey when the passing of a leader becomes more than a personal loss and evolves into a collective moment of reflection. The sudden demise of Shillong Member of Parliament Dr. Ricky Andrew J. Syngkon has brought Meghalaya to such a pause. His departure has left the state in grief and disbelief, not only because of the position he held but because of the promise he represented. At a time when his political journey appeared to be entering its most influential phase, his absence has created a void that is emotional, intellectual, and political all at once.

Life often reminds us of its uncertainty in seemingly abrupt ways. The shock surrounding his passing reflects how deeply citizens had begun to identify him with a new political possibility, one grounded in thoughtfulness, integrity, and public purpose. For many, he was not simply a politician but a statesman shaped by scholarship and guided by principle.

### Academic Roots and the Making of a Political Mind

Dr. Syngkon's rise to prominence emerged from the academic world rather than traditional political structures. Born in 1972 during a formative period in Meghalaya's post statehood evolution, he grew up in an environment where questions of identity, governance, and development were deeply intertwined.

His long association with North Eastern Hill University defined both his intellectual character and his public philosophy. With advanced academic training in economics and commerce and a doctoral focus on small scale industrial development in East Khasi Hills, he examined how tribal economies function within unique socio-cultural and geographical realities.

His research emphasized local entrepreneurship and community driven growth, arguing that development must be rooted in lived experiences rather than imposed through generic policy frameworks. Over more than two decades as an educator, he influenced generations of students while quietly shaping a worldview that later translated into politics.

His decision to enter public life was motivated by a recognition that academic discourse alone could not resolve structural challenges such as youth unemployment and institutional stagnation. Politics became, for him, an extension of civic responsibility. The Emergence of a New Political Narrative

The formation of the Voice of the People Party (VPP) in 2021 introduced a fresh narrative into Meghalaya's political discourse. Built on ideals of revival, restoration, and transformation, the party sought to respond to growing public dissatisfaction with entrenched political practices.

As General Secretary, Dr. Syngkon helped shape the party's ideological clarity and organizational strength. The symbolism of the winnowing tray resonated deeply with voters, reflecting a desire to separate ethical governance from political decay. The VPP's early electoral gains signaled shifting public sentiment, but the decisive moment arrived in the 2024 Lok Sabha election when he secured a sweeping mandate in the Shillong constituency. That victory represented more than an electoral success, it indicated a generational shift in expectations, particularly among younger voters seeking principled leadership.

### Parliamentary Role and Legislative Engagement

In Parliament, Dr. Syngkon maintained a stance as a strong regional voice that was frequently overlooked

in the national discourse. His speeches were characterized by an analytical approach, which was influenced by his academic background. He asked questions on digital connectivity, artificial intelligence education, economic empowerment of tribal communities, and constitutional safeguards for indigenous identity.

His first speech in Parliament was characterized by collective rebuilding and development, which indicated that he was a leader who preferred collaboration rather than confrontation. On matters such as the regulation of coal mining, he maintained a balanced approach that was characterized by a quest for clarity and fairness, while taking into consideration the imperatives of the environment and the realities of livelihoods. His involvement in institutional governance, including matters related to NEHU, further cemented his image as a leader who remained grounded in his academic background even as he operated in the realm of national politics.

### Social Contributions and Cultural Advocacy

Despite his political ascent, Dr. Syngkon maintained a modest personal profile grounded in his identity as an educator. His advocacy for the inclusion of the Khasi language in the Eighth Schedule reflected a broader commitment to cultural dignity and preservation. Beyond legislative responsibilities, he engaged actively with civil society and faith based organizations, encouraging dialogue on unity, ethical leadership, and inclusive development. His involvement in academic discussions on regional trade demonstrated a vision that extended beyond electoral cycles toward long term economic transformation.

### Reshaping Meghalaya's Political Landscape

The rise of Dr. Syngkon reshaped the dynamics of regional politics. The Voice of the People Party emerged as a credible alternative to established forces, compelling political actors to reassess their approach to governance and public engagement. His leadership bridged intellectual discourse and grassroots mobilization, appealing to both educated urban voters and rural communities. Many observers saw in him a potential future Chief Ministerial figure capable of redefining governance through policy driven leadership. His emergence symbolized a broader transition toward politics shaped by ideas rather than inheritance.

### Legacy, Loss, and the Questions Ahead

The death of Dr. Ricky Andrew J. Syngkon is a defining point in the political development of Meghalaya. His transition from an academic scholar to a leader in parliament embodied the best of both worlds, a quality that is hard to find in modern-day politics. His achievements are a testament to the fact that he was far from being at the end of his political journey, but that he had already made himself a true son of the soil leader whose impact would be immortal in the political consciousness of Meghalaya.

For the Voice of the People Party, his absence creates both uncertainty and responsibility. The challenge now lies in transforming his vision into lasting institutional strength. For the state as a whole, the greater question is whether the ethical politics he championed will continue to guide public life. In the end, leaders leave behind more than memories, they leave behind unfinished conversations. The true measure of Dr. Syngkon's legacy will be whether Meghalaya carries forward the ideals he embodied and transforms grief into a renewed commitment to principled leadership. (The author is an independent columnist & scholar)

## Politics of Coercion

THAT various shades of pressure groups are also politically conscious and looking for the time and opportunity to enter active politics goes without saying. This has been the norm in Meghalaya. But there are other ways of playing politics than the present style of coercing business establishments, central and state government offices, banks and post offices to close shop on some pretext or the other. The question is who has empowered these pressure groups to force the entire city to come to a standstill? And why is it that the law stands-by to watch such lawlessness being perpetrated in broad daylight? What does this say about the rule of law in Meghalaya? Or has this rule of law collapsed under the weight of societal pressures to conform to the diktat of sundry pressure groups?

The sudden demise of Dr Ricky AJ Syngkon is a matter of grief and pain for all in Meghalaya irrespective of political affiliations. But knowing Dr Syngkon, he would not have wanted any kind of disruption of normal life. In his life he avoided any spectacle and drama within Parliament and outside it. His behaviour was genteel and respectful of all voices. This aspect should have been borne in mind by those forces of coercion who believe that only by closing down shutters can there be real mourning. What these forces of oppression refuse to admit is that when shops are forcibly closed, the nature of the gesture shifts from voluntary respect to compelled compliance. While these groups may believe they are protecting the "dignity" of the funeral and ensuring maximum participation and to avoid what they perceive as disrespect for the MP. But coercion such as these raise ethical and democratic concerns. A tribute rooted in compulsion risks contradicting the values of public service and democratic freedom that elected representatives are meant to uphold. The question that also arises is whether Dr Syngkon would have wanted normal economic activities to come to a standstill because of his death. As a Member of Parliament in the Lok Sabha, Dr. Syngkon was part of a system grounded in constitutional freedoms — including the freedom to work, conduct business, and make personal choices. Most public leaders who dedicate their lives to service do so with the intention of empowering citizens, not restricting them.

A forced shutdown can unintentionally disrupt the income of daily wage earners, small traders and vendors. Above all it creates a climate of fear and resentment rather than genuine mourning. Dr. Syngkon valued public goodwill and democratic norms and it can well be argued that he would have preferred voluntary homage — people paying their respects by choice rather than obligation. This incident raises a broader issue about political culture in the North East and across India. Mourning a public leader is deeply emotional and communal. But true respect is demonstrated through upholding the rule of law; respecting individual freedoms and continuing the work the leader believed in. A forced closure may appear powerful at the moment, but it does not necessarily reflect the maturity of a democratic society. In the end, the most meaningful tribute to Dr. Ricky Syngkon would likely not be shuttered shops, but citizens carrying forward his vision — whatever they understood that to be — through peaceful participation in public life. Grief should unite people; not compel them.

Meghalaya had only 5 districts in 1972. 20 years later, two districts were created. Another 20 years later, 4 more districts were created. 9 years after that, one more district was created which brings the total number to 12 districts. Cogent propositions for district creation are:

Shillong Metropolitan District: Guwahati, Mumbai, Bangalore, Calcutta, Madras, Hyderabad and other cities have a district within the city in order to ensure robust governance, administrative efficiency — convenience, logistics, and maintain quality law and order. In a district which has the highest crime rate in Meghalaya, bringing administration closer to the people in Shillong with a population of approximately 5,52,500 people with a population density of approximately 8,200 people / Sq. Km is imperative. Shillong has more than half of the constituencies in the district the Home Department has proposed to have two police commissionerates like Guwahati, to curb the ever rising crime rate. Shillong and Guwahati are the only Class 2 cities in North East India. Guwahati has got the attention it deserves with a separate metropolitan district. Shillong, the oldest capital in North East India since 1874 deserves the same respect it rightfully deserves.

Central Khasi Hills District: Encompassing three blocks which is the optimal threshold for district creation namely Sohiong, Mawphlang and Mawsynram Blocks with Mawphlang being at the center as the district headquarters. These three blocks possess the requisite size of 1,451 Sq Kms and population of 1,90,240 people approximately (health census 2025-26) when these two factors are combined together. This district will require a bit of work which is the upgradation of blocks to sub divisions; which with the dedicated mindset and methodical financial planning of the government, this will not be a problem.

South Khasi Hills District: The reason for this name since Ri Bhoi is North Khasi Hills hence the name of this new district encompassing three blocks which is the optimal threshold for district creation name Shella, Pynursla and Laitkroh Blocks with Laitkroh being at the center as the district headquarters with district offices disbursed at Laitkroh, Mawjrong and Laitlyngkot for ease of travel of the Pynursla people. These three blocks possess the requisite size 1,115 Sq Kms and population of 1,95,050

people approximately (health census 2025-26) when these two factors are combined together. A few reasons why Sohra is not feasible as the district headquarters are (a). Sohra is not geographically placed centrally like Laitkroh thus posing difficulty in travel for the people of Laitlyngkot, Umting, Laitkroh and especially Pynursla. Laitkroh and Pynursla blocks will never accept Sohra as the district. According to sources over 55 Local Headmen from Mawdok village to 12 miles to Laitlyngkot are in favour of creation of Laitkroh as the district headquarters versus only 12 headmen of the SDDF who favour Sohra. (b). The natural tourist beauty of Sohra will be drastically affected with housing and population expansions accompanied with solid and liquid waste arising thereof which will affect tourism negatively with it being the mainstay of Sohra. Hence, Laitkroh is the most agreeable, compromised middle ground which is a win-win for all sides involved. Upgradation of the Laitkroh block to a sub-division is needed immediately.

North West Garo Hills District: The Garo Hills have North-South, East-West and South West Garo Hills Districts with just one district needed that is North West Garo Hills District with Dadengre as District HQ to complete this full circle.

Genuine Reasons: There are many factors why many Indian states create more districts as time passes. A few reasons such as "population explosion and developmental needs" for creation of new districts are (a). EKH District has the greatest number of Blocks in Meghalaya with 11, (b). The district with the second largest number of blocks is West Garo Hills District which is not even half the number of Blocks that EKH has, (c). EKH District has the largest population at 10, 71,810 people approximately (Health Census 2025-26), (d). To Bring the Administration Closer to the People is difficult now with 11 Blocks, (e) To Ensure Efficient Administration with no leakages in which public benefits reach all walks of life, (f). To Enable District Administration to carry important Socio-Infrastructural development, (g). To "Decongest Shillong" by lessening the number of travellers to Shillong, hence traffic, thereby saving money, time, labour from the travelling to Shillong especially for those living in hard-to-reach vil-

lages - international border villages in which they can now complete their essential work in their respective Sub Divisions or District Headquarters, (h). To transfer the number of DSC posts reserved for those blocks to this new district with additional sanctioning of posts over a span of 9 years with 80% job reservation for the locals of the district.

The question of extraneous amount of work in all the District Offices (DOs) in East Khasi Hills also arises when all these District Offices have to work for 11 Blocks with nearly 11 lakh population which becomes unfair when one considers that they get the same salary as those in the District Offices of the other Districts in Meghalaya which have only 2-3 blocks with the second highest number of blocks being West Garo Hills District with only a meagre 5 Blocks. Therefore, equality of work in the district offices in East Khasi Hills District is the need of the hour to bring things at par with the other district offices in Meghalaya. Manipur which is approximately 85 Kms less than Meghalaya has 16 districts. However, I am absolutely convinced that Meghalaya needs a maximum of 15 Districts with 2 new districts emanating from the trifurcation of East Khasi Hills District and with 1 new district emanating from the bifurcation of West Garo Hills District. After their creation, district creation must never be allowed, ever again!

Financial Solution: There is never a good time for creation of districts in the perennially deficit states of North East India. However, with prudent financial budgeting in the short and long terms, I truly believe that creation of these districts will not hamper development in our state just as it did not hamper development in 2012 and 2021 when 4 new districts were created and 1 new district was created or the re-election of the party in the ruling dispensation in the following year such as in 1993, 2013 and 2023 respectively which was more resounding than ever. The 2012 methodology to avoid cumbersome financial expenditure is the best. Instead of sanctioning 42 crore at one go for the creation of one new district for capital expenditure and personnel, this same amount is broken up so that it is realized through yearly sanctions in a span of 9 years till it reached this

threshold limit where nearly all the work is finished with the blueprint and the basic foundation being laid for further enhancement. This is the methodology which must be replicated for creating 3 more districts in Meghalaya next year with minimal effect on the state treasury.

GST of 9,631 crore was released by the Center to the State. The Cabinet can take 61 crore from this amount to create three districts which will be 23.4 crore per district. Thereafter, whenever GST is devolved by the Center over the remaining years, the Cabinet or successive Cabinets can replicate this same exact method.

Debunking Critics: There are two types of critics, one type is within the ruling dispensation and the other type is from the opposition. When the ruling dispensation created a new district in 2021, critics within the party said that this would be a bane for the government and also that district was created in the constituencies of coalition partners. The opposition parties opposed the move since the state does not have the financial wherewithal and that its creation would hamper development. However, the state did not incur financial burden and contrary to belief, development accelerated more than ever from 2021-22, 2022-23 leading to a thunderous re-election of the party heading the ruling dispensation in 2023 which became the most successful run in its history.

This was reminiscent of 2013 when the ruling party at that time got more seats than in the previous election year. One of the main reasons for the success of these two parties in the election year following creation of new districts was that the people in those constituencies being incorporated in those new districts who had been yearning for overall development appreciated the government's assent to their genuine demands in granting districts and hence voted resoundingly for the party at helm of decision making as a token of their appreciation. The creation of new districts helped the poor and low-income middle-class families in saving time, money, labour and at the same time ensuring administrative efficiency, bringing administration closer to the people in light of population expansion, developmental issues and reducing the horrible traffic congestion in Shillong. It will be a win-win scenario for both East Khasi Hills and those newly created districts.

## Living without feeling alive On Silent Suffering and Modern Existence

By Sunrise Pohtam

For many, the main title may sound like a catchy line from a movie. But what I mean here is not cinematic. Rather, it is emotional and psychological, and perhaps, in some ways, spiritual too. I write this out of deep concern, and while parts of this writing are based on my own personal psychological experiences, many others may relate to it as well. I do not write this to seek validation. Instead, I write to create awareness; especially for those who still believe life is fair and that everything works fine, when for the majority of us, it does not.

First of all, humans till date are known to be the only beings with consciousness. Yet, there is no guarantee that this consciousness ensures safety, security, or happiness. There is nothing to suggest that life will turn out fine and comfortable, where freedom becomes final and happiness becomes a "promised land." In fact, we often find ourselves entangled in our own quest for ultimate happiness, freedom, and perhaps redemption. Just why? Because life itself is unbearable.

Life numbs us to the point that we start questioning our own existence: where did it go wrong? It may have started good, but why this now? Some go further to philosophically question their own existence, arguing that they did not consent to be born into this world to inherently suffer, often without meaning or a clear purpose. Some friends I know want to finally get married to avoid the "void" in their life. I congratulate them. However, reality itself is indifferent. So, the real question becomes, after getting married or finally securing a dream job at some office, does that truly solve the hollowness that life does not actually care to fill up?

Speaking of these incurable existential questions, I am myself aware of my own being and have come to see that sometimes life itself does not seem to realise that I exist too. Yes, I was brought up in a humble, cheerful, and hardworking middle-class family. My siblings and I are educated. I managed to obtain two bachelor's degrees and one master's degree. Even then, the question remains, what was all this for? To be frank, it does create a sense of security. But despite that, it still feels hollow when the sun sets. At times, it feels like childishly "beating the air." Why? I believe we all know the answer: traumatic experiences. And after everything we manage to overcome and finally settle, we are left asking: are we still the same person we were at the start?

Here, I do not patronise myself, nor do I support nihilism or absurdism when I write all this. Rather, this is simply an opinion meant for those who are seekers who were

trying to make sense of what is actually going on in life at its most realistic level, free from societal expectations or religious obligations. (Here, I do not mean faith itself, but the pressure to accept fixed, religious answers that often undermine important theological views on suffering.)

Many people suggest doing this or doing that to help life settle in a good way. But is that not the same path followed by everyone in the family, or in society as a whole? Is there any guarantee that these "manufactured narratives" will work the same way for me, for him, or for her? After all, is their life mine, or is my life theirs? Most of the people I know, even the most educated among them, still follow this same pattern of thinking. That is why I often end such conversations by saying, "Just be me for one week, then you will know." That may sound harsh. But because of these ready-made ways of thinking, the path to empathy and careful understanding often begins to fade away.

Those of us who have lived long enough with existential dread are not clinically depressed. That is the one thing to begin with. At the same time, we are neither thinkers nor philosophers of any sort. We are simply aware of our own frailty and mortality. Because of this awareness, we refuse to accept socially manufactured thoughts, and we avoid everyday engagements that add nothing to our already fragile being. We are not people to be ridiculed when we fail to process instant replies to sensitive comments. Are we existential rebels? Relatively, yes. Are we suicidal? No. Instead, we simply experience life differently from others. Does that make us incapable of living as members of society? Absolutely not. In fact, we are part and parcel of society. We are not strangers to it, nor to how it works. More importantly, we do care about the people we come across. We only refuse to accept certain patterns, because our minds are not wired to carry such heavy societal expectations. Otherwise, we would risk the weight of being on our fragility - as it always has been.

Finally, this writing does not claim to answer every question faced by those with identity crises or psychological vulnerabilities. It is only a reminder that they are not alone. At the same time, it is directed at those who live comfortable lives yet carry a judgmental attitude toward people who think and live differently. As said, we are humans too. And like everyone else, we deserve the same treatment and empathy while trying to make sense of life on this small, floating, blue planet called Earth; whom we fondly refer to as home.

### Letters to the Editor

## Can Pressure Groups stop Government Offices and Banks from functioning?

Editor,  
Through your newspaper, I would like to express my serious concern about the recent forced closure of Central Government offices and banks in Jaintia Hills during the funeral of Dr. Ricky AJ Syngkon.

While the State Government has the authority to declare a state holiday, it is important to remember that Central Government offices do not function under State Government holiday orders. Post Offices and other Central institutions work under the Government of India. Banks also follow central laws, including the Negotiable Instruments Act, and are not controlled by state executive orders.

Reports that pressure groups allegedly forced shops, banks, and Central Government offices to close are very worrying. No organisation has the legal power to overrule the law. A state holiday does not automati-

cally apply to Central institutions, and it certainly cannot be enforced through pressure or force.

Respect and mourning should be voluntary. Forcing daily wage earners, small business owners, and staff of Central offices to close their workplaces is not a true tribute. It affects people's livelihoods and creates confusion about who has the authority to make such decisions.

If the State Government declares a holiday for offices under its control, that is its right. But extending that order to Central Government institutions without legal authority shows either a misunderstanding of the law or abuse of power. Both are unacceptable in a democratic country like India.

India has a clear system where State and Central authorities have separate powers. Emotional situations should not lead to disorder. Institutions must function according to the law, not under pressure from any group.

I request the concerned authorities to issue clear instructions in the future so that no organisation assumes powers it does not legally have.

Yours etc.,  
Mantra Hame Dkhar,  
Via email

## Eight Decades in Shillong Yet Struggling for Trading Licence - A Painful Reality

Editor,  
With reference to the news report titled "KHADC Opp slams CEM's 'genuine non-tribal' remark" (Shillong, Feb 19, 2026), I wish to express my strong concern over the objection raised to the term "genuine non-tribal." I fail to understand how referring to a family that has lived in Shillong for nearly 80 years as "genuine" undermines local interests.

The same report mentions that in the Dhankheti parking lot nearly 90% of the employees are local tribal residents, and the venture is in partnership with a tribal stakeholder. When employment and participation of locals are clearly ensured, how can this be seen as a threat to local protection? Such cooperation strengthens, not weakens, local interests.

It is very unfortunate that even after eight decades in the city, business families

like the 'Bawris' are still facing difficulties in obtaining or renewing trading licenses. After contributing honestly to the economy for generations, being subjected to repeated hurdles and harassment is painful and discouraging.

The Constitution of India guarantees equality before law under Article 14 and the right to carry on trade or business under Article 19(1)(g). Livelihood is a matter of dignity and fundamental right. If genuine, law-abiding residents continue to face denial despite fulfilling all formalities, they may be compelled to seek remedy before the court of law.

At the same time, I would like to ask why leaders of all political parties are not raising this genuine issue in the Assembly. Till when will such harassment continue? Political parties must rise above selective silence and address the concerns of every citizen. Non-tribals should not be treated merely as a vote bank during elections and ignored thereafter. Responsible leadership demands fairness, courage, and equal representation.

I sincerely request all Dorbar Shnongs—especially in areas where non-tribals are long-settled residents—

to kindly issue NOCs to genuine applicants who possess valid documents and comply with legal requirements. There are only limited areas where non-tribals reside and conduct business, and even those places are nearing saturation. They are not seeking to disturb tribal-majority areas, but only asking for fair opportunity within their own settled localities.

After 80 years in this city, no family should feel insecure about earning an honest livelihood. It is time for political leaders and institutions alike to uphold justice, fairness, and harmony for all.

Yours etc.,  
Homnath Gautam  
Shillong -2

## Mother Tongue a Precious Asset

Editor,  
I would like to express my sincere appreciation for the thoughtful article 'Mother Language: The Voice of Our Roots', written by Marbareen Khonglam. I do sincerely feel it deserves special recognition for the sensitive and heartfelt way it has brought out the emo-

tional, cultural, and social value of our mother tongues, especially in the context of Meghalaya. We do rarely get to read a write-up that speaks not only to the mind but also to the heart, reminding us that our mother tongues are far more than a tool of communication - it is the living voice of our identity, memories, and heritage. The author very rightly points out that a language is not only a means for communication but also something that carries with it our memories, our traditions, and the very sense of who we are. The author rightly says a language is not just for communication. It carries our memories. It keeps our traditions alive. It is part of who we are.

The concern that young people are gradually moving away from their native dialects feels very real and something we need to think about now. Today, when many small languages in the North-East are slowly fading away, and some are already marked as endangered in language surveys and UNESCO reports, such ideas feel very important. They don't only share facts. They wake people up. They help us see what we might lose by keeping quiet. The article also deserves appre-

ciation. It clearly shows the richness of local dialects, including those spoken in the Pynursla region. It also gives space to ordinary young people. Many of them still feel a strong emotional bond with their mother tongue. This personal touch makes the message very powerful. It also makes it easy for us to connect with. The feelings sound real. The experiences feel true. It speaks about real life, not just ideas.

History shows this very clearly. When a mother tongue slowly disappears, a community loses much more than just words. It loses its folk stories. It loses its old wisdom. Cultural practices fade. Shared memories also begin to disappear. These are the things that quietly keep people united. That is why the author's call to speak our own language with pride — at home, with friends, and in public — feels both practical and necessary today.

At the same time, protecting our languages cannot be the duty of individuals alone. Governments must support mother-tongue teaching in primary schools. They should help record and preserve endangered dialects. Proper funding for cultural and literary work in regional languages is also needed.

Schools can help by holding debates, storytelling programmes, competitions and cultural events in local languages. This helps children feel comfortable using them. Parents also have a big role. Children should grow up speaking their own language freely, without shame or fear.

It is good to see that many community groups, writers, cultural bodies and committed teachers across Meghalaya and the wider North-East are already doing important work. They are recording folk songs. They are publishing books in local languages. They are organising cultural festivals. Their work shows something simple but important — when people act together, even small efforts can slowly bring real and lasting change.

Marbareen Khonglam's article is not just a tribute to the mother language. I strongly feel, it deserves wider discussion — for silence never saves what we love.

Yours etc.,  
Jairaj  
Via email

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

## Asia's century, whither India

BEFORE the turn of the century, Henry Kissinger visualized that the 21st Century would be Asia's Century — just as the 20th was dominated by America and the 19th by Europe following the Industrial Revolution and arrival of machines. Situations conspired to make Asia big, a geographic sphere of high activity and nations of thriving economies. The Asean + 3, dominated by China, Japan and South Korea, has for the past decades acted as the production line for items of western consumption. Now, with perceptible affluence among large sections of the population, this geographic region is also seen as the world's largest market principally for consumer goods; and more importantly for electronic gadgets. For most in the Asean + 3 region, it's no more a hand-to-mouth existence. In recent years, the region accounted for 28 per cent of the global final demand — against the US demand at 26 per cent.

Some two decades ago, it is said that a third of Asean + 3's exports of finished products headed for the US; of late, it fell to 20 per cent. Intra-regional demand rose to 30 per cent. China obviously led this change, but individual nations in the grouping also contributed substantially to this. Asian economies like South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong earned the sobriquet of Tiger Economies during the 1960s-90s span. They were joined ably by the Tiger Club of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. The economies of South Korea, Japan, Taiwan etc gained through hi-tech manufacturing-based growth. They learned from each other—starting with Japan, which rose like a phoenix after the disastrous WW-II. China not only produces hugely but has also emerged as a large consumer market. It grew both ways. In global automobile sales, China is the largest market—forming more than the combined share of the EU and the US. China boasts of having a fifth of the world's smartphone users — some four times the US share. Both in production and market supply chains, China overtook Japan to the top slot. The Chinese products are sold to the largest extent in nations in the East or South East Asia. At the same time, a third of Asean + 3's manufactured electronic components reach Chinese households as finished products. Together, they're on a roll.

The question is, where did India figure in this scheme of things. We hold a bulging consumer base, fed largely by industrially active nations. India holds less than six per cent of Asia's industrial exports — and its manufacturing output is just around 10 per cent. India trails behind Vietnam and Malaysia in overall competitiveness; and India, holding the world's largest population, ranks the 6th among Asian economies as per the Asia Manufacturing Index 2026. The villain of the piece here is the system — clogged by bureaucratic red tape, corruption and incompetent leadership. When the age of Economic Liberalization came in the early 1990s, a promise was to do away with the licence raj. Nothing of the sort happened. Rather, the scenario has progressively turned from bad to worse. It's simply difficult for an entrepreneur here to put his best foot forward. The system conspires to kill his spirit. And that's where India is today!

### Letters to the Editor

## India fails its North East Citizens yet again

Editor,

How many more videos must go viral before this country admits it has a racism problem? The recent racist attack on young women from Arunachal Pradesh in Malviya Nagar is not an "isolated incident." It is a mirror and the reflection is ugly. Following a minor residential dispute, three women were allegedly subjected to racial slurs and degrading insinuations targeting their identity. The brazenness of the incident, captured on video, suggests something deeply disturbing: a belief that there will be no real consequences.

In January this year, an Arunachali youth, Arjun Rimo, was reportedly assaulted in Karol Bagh, Delhi after what began as a minor altercation which allegedly escalated into racial abuse and physical violence. Around the same period, a young woman from Meghalaya was rescued by KSU (Khasi Student Union) in Delhi after allegedly being lured with a fake job offer and forced into sexual exploitation — a case that again exposed the vulnerability of North-Eastern women in metropolitan spaces.

For decades, people from the North-East have been asked, "Where are you really from?" mocked for their appearance, stereotyped, fetishised, and treated as foreigners in their own country.

Delhi benefits from their talent, their labour, their presence, yet too often withholds dignity.

That three Indian women from Arunachal Pradesh, preparing for the UPSC and staying in Malviya Nagar, Delhi, were racially abused and targeted is not just shocking but shameful as well. That too, over a minor incident involving dust from an AC installation. This is not a neighbourhood dispute but a constitutional failure. When citizens from the North East are treated as outsiders within India, the idea of India itself stands wounded.

Delhi calls itself a global city. Yet for years, students and professionals from the North-Eastern states have faced slurs, suspicion, and social exclusion here. The silence that follows each episode is louder than the abuse itself.

I urge the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Delhi, Rekha Gupta, to intervene personally and ensure swift and exemplary action under the relevant provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. The National Commission for Women (NCW) must also take immediate cognisance, provide protection to the victims, and demand visible accountability from law enforcement. Symbolic condemnation is no longer enough, we need arrests, prosecution, and consequences.

Racism is not "banter." It is violence, erodes dignity and divides the nation. If Delhi cannot guarantee safety and respect to citizens from the North-East, what message does that send about

our unity?

Enough statements, enough outrage cycles and enough excuses. We North East People Demand Action.

Your's etc.,  
Shivani Pde,  
Via email

## Another Case of Racial Abuse!

Editor

The reported racial abuse of three young women from Arunachal Pradesh in Malviya Nagar, New Delhi, on February 20, 2026, is very disturbing and painful to hear about. The video now circulating online, and the reactions that followed, have left many of us genuinely worried.

Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma described the incident as "unfortunate and unacceptable," saying the language and behaviour seen in the video were very sad and inexcusable, and warning that such acts hurt the spirit of India's diversity.

Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Shri Pema Khandu also strongly condemned the incident as "absolutely unacceptable," making it clear that such behaviour has no place in society. He immediately spoke to the Delhi Police Commissioner and asked for the absconding accused to be traced quickly and strict action taken.

Leaders across the North-east, including the Government of Sikkim, have also expressed concern and

the people for political gains. And as we were trying to understand the possible fallout of the reservation policy report, we got the shocking news of Ricky AJ Syngkon, Member of Parliament from Shillong and general secretary of the VPP, succumbing to a cardiac arrest while playing futsal in Mawlai Mawiong. We were both stunned and deeply disturbed because we knew Ricky not just as a politician but also as our teacher in college.

I met Ricky for the first time in my college where he took a paper on economics. He was a very steady teacher — someone who did the job required of him to the best of his ability. After that I again encountered him when he became the MP. This was during the funeral ceremony for Tarun Bhartiya in Lumphyngngad when he came to pay his respects. I was very critical of the VPP's attempt to use the reservation policy to create communal tensions at a time when the crisis in Manipur was at its most critical period. There was talk on the streets that if the government did not accede to the demand for review of the policy, a Manipur-like situation could develop in the state as well. In the last few years, we had already witnessed many disturbances, which included the conflict around Them Lew Mawlong. On one occasion, my friend and I narrowly escaped being caught in a clash between the mob and the police while trying to cross Wahingdoh on our way to Khyndailad. So, I was worried that a similar situation could arise in Meghalaya as well. Fortunately, despite the tension, the people of Meghalaya found a way not to succumb to the instigation, and we were spared a disaster. So, I was very critical of the party and hence of Ricky's candidature for the MP seat from Shillong.

When I saw Ricky at the funeral, I tried to avoid him. But when he saw me, he came towards me, smiled, and shook my hand. I was taken aback by it as I thought he would also ignore me. We didn't talk, but it was appar-

ent he held no ill feelings against me. I met him again a couple of times and again he didn't ignore me. On one occasion we sat together for dinner. Patricia Mukhim was also present and she tried to provoke him by asking whether the VPP was becoming close to the BJP. I also chimed in by telling him that the way he was talking about Viksit Bharat during his address to the program, it seemed he was supporting Modi's agenda. It was, of course, banter and he took it in the right spirit.

My few interactions with him were pleasant. I do not subscribe to the VPP's version of jaidbynriew politics in how it is blatantly targeting the non-indigenous community by making it difficult for them to do business, the only avenue left for the community to survive in the state. Love for our own community should not translate into hate for others. So, while on an ideological level we had disagreements, I think we would have had no problem sitting on the same platform and talking about issues which concerned the community and the state. In this regard, his biggest asset was his humble nature.

Another friend who saw him in Delhi told me how he would sit alone in his shorts and eat lunch in the canteen as an ordinary person. He did not think of himself as a 'don burom' who felt they no longer belonged with ordinary people. I remember a teacher from the University who had been in a very important position in the administration. The position came with its perks, which included a vehicle with a driver. This teacher would sit in the front with the driver. When the vehicle stopped, he would wait for the driver to get down, go all the way round, and open the door for him. I am sure there are many incumbent MLAs/MDCs and ministers who do the same: Ricky drove himself on his scooter and did not need all this pretension. That was one character trait which endeared him to the common people. So, while the agita-

tion on the reservation policy played an instrumental role in getting him elected to Parliament, his calm demeanor and humility were also what attracted the people to him. His loss, therefore, is something that will be felt not just by the party but by a large section of the population.

Ricky was in office for less than two years and it is difficult to judge his performance. He did raise the issue of illegal coal mining in the state, which due to the Thangsko incident has become a national headline. The manner in which Vincent Pala, Congress candidate for the Shillong MP seat, chose not to blame the government after the incident showed that, had it not been for Ricky, the issue would have never been raised in Parliament. I was particularly impressed by his opening speech in Parliament where his love for the community and the homeland was on full display. At the end of the day we are, after all, 'para doh para snam', i.e., 'born from the same flesh and blood', and for that reason even though we have disagreements there is a chance we can meet somewhere in between. Ricky symbolized that space and with him gone, we will need another voice that can bridge that gap.

For the VPP, now that the fallout of the report on the reservation policy is imminent, a calm and humble voice like his could have soothed those who will feel betrayed by the party over the issue. It remains to be seen how the party will deal with the loss in a political manner. But more importantly, Ricky was also a close friend to many in the party, and the loss they would be feeling right now is not about any political implications, but about the departure of a loved one. And for that I offer my condolences. I hope, the party, his family, and loved ones will always find a way to remember him for his kindness and humility. The state has become poorer today.

(The views expressed in the article are those of the author and do not reflect in any way his affiliation to any organisation or institution)

only protects the victims but also reassures families and builds public confidence.

The Northeast has given India many reasons to feel proud — from Olympic champions like Mary Kom and Mirabai Chanu to soldiers guarding difficult borders, and countless teachers, artists, officers and entrepreneurs quietly serving the nation every single day. Respecting their dignity is therefore not just a regional issue but a national responsibility.

True national unity is not shown in speeches, but in how safely an ordinary citizen can study, work and walk freely in any part of the country. Every Indian — whether from Shillong, Itanagar, Gangtok, Imphal, Kohima, Aizawl, Agartala or anywhere else — must feel equally safe, respected and at home.

Yours etc.,  
Jairaj,  
Via email

## Imparting CPR Training Must Become a Public Priority

Editor,

The sudden and untimely demise of our Member of Parliament, Ricky A. J. Syngkon, has shaken the conscience of our state. Beyond the grief and tributes, it compels us to confront an urgent public health reality: sudden cardiac arrest can strike anyone, anywhere, without warning.

In such critical moments,

immediate Cardio-pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) administered by bystanders can significantly increase survival chances. Yet, in our society, CPR training is neither widespread nor systematically imparted. This gap must be addressed without delay.

It is time we move from awareness to action. CPR training should be formally integrated into school and college curricula, workplace safety programmes, and community initiatives. Dorbar Shnong, Seng Samla, youth organisations and NGOs can collaborate with the Health Department to organise structured training workshops across districts.

Imparting CPR skills does not require years of study; only a few hours of practical training. However, those few hours can mean the difference between life and death.

We cannot undo this tragic loss. But we can ensure that it becomes a turning point, a catalyst for equipping our citizens with life-saving knowledge. A prepared community is a safer community.

Let us commit to building a state where more people are trained, more lives are protected, and fewer families have to endure preventable tragedy.

Yours etc.,  
Manisha M Pala,  
Via email

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## A Tribute from the Hills of Shillong The Enduring Legacy of Dr. Ricky Andrew J. Syngkon (1971–2026)

By Danny K Rajee

The passing of Dr. Ricky Andrew J. Syngkon in 2026 marks a profound moment in Meghalaya's political and social history. His journey from regional leadership to national representation symbolized a generational shift in the Northeast's political imagination. As Member of Parliament from Shillong, he did not merely occupy a seat in Parliament—he represented a rising confidence within Meghalaya that demanded cleaner governance, assertive development, and authentic regional representation.

His life and career reflected the transformation of a region long perceived as peripheral into one increasingly conscious of its voice, its rights, and its strategic importance within the Indian Union. In remembering Dr. Syngkon, we are called not only to honor his public service but to reflect on the lessons his leadership leaves behind.

### Regional Identity as a Foundation of Strength

One of the defining characteristics of Dr. Syngkon's political persona was his unapologetic embrace of Meghalaya's identity. In an era where political leaders often subsume local concerns into broader national narratives, he placed indigenous rights, cultural preservation, and governance reform at the forefront of his public discourse.

This approach carried immense symbolic value. For a region historically underrepresented in mainstream political conversations, authentic articulation matters deeply. By foregrounding Meghalaya's lived realities—its socio-cultural sensitivities, administrative challenges, and development aspirations—he demonstrated that regional identity is not a barrier to national relevance. Rather, it is the foundation of meaningful participation.

The lesson is clear: true representation begins with rootedness. Leaders who remain grounded in their community's aspirations build trust that transcends electoral cycles.

### Integrity as Political Capital

In smaller states, where governance outcomes are visible and political networks are tightly woven, credibility is both fragile and invaluable. Dr. Syngkon's emphasis on reform and accountability resonated strongly with citizens increasingly weary of inefficiency and patronage-driven systems.

His political positioning reflected a broader public sentiment—an insistence on transparency, administrative discipline, and ethical governance. While reform rhetoric is common in political campaigns, consistent articulation and advocacy for systemic improvement distinguish enduring leaders from transient ones.

Reputation, in such contexts, becomes political capital. Trust is not built overnight; it is cultivated through clarity of vision and consistency of action. For aspiring leaders across sectors—public administration, entrepreneurship, or civil society—the message is powerful: integrity is not merely a moral virtue; it is strategic strength.

### The Youth Awakening in Shillong

Shillong has long been recognized as a vibrant educational and cultural hub. In recent years, it has also become a center of youth-driven political awareness. Dr. Syngkon's support base reflected this demographic shift—a generation seeking performance over patronage and policy depth over symbolism.

Today's youth electorate is informed, digitally connected, and globally aware. They demand measurable outcomes in areas such as employment generation, infrastructure, education reform, and digital connectivity. Emotional appeals and traditional political rhetoric no longer suffice.

In engaging this constituency, Dr. Syngkon underscored a crucial truth: the future of leadership in the Northeast will belong to those who are intellectually prepared, policy-informed, and capable of translating vision into implementation. The era of passive political participation is fading, replaced by a more analytical and demanding citizenry.

### Institutional Courage and Alternative Platforms

Another defining dimension of his rise was the demonstration that alternative political platforms can achieve national representation. For decades, parliamentary politics in the Northeast largely revolved around dominant national parties. His ascent signaled that institutional innovation remains possible within India's democratic framework.

Institution-building requires resilience. It demands organizational discipline, strategic clarity, and long-term commitment. By participating in and strengthening regional political structures, Dr. Syngkon expanded the democratic imagination of Meghalaya's electorate.

This lesson extends beyond politics. Economic transformation in the Northeast—whether in tourism, technology, agriculture, or entrepreneurship—will require similar institutional courage. New models must be built when inherited systems fall short. Progress demands both imagination and persistence.

### Assertive Regional Development

The Northeast's developmental narrative has long been shaped by infrastructural gaps, logistical constraints, and economic underrepresentation. Yet it is equally defined by immense potential: breathtaking landscapes, rich cultural heritage, strategic geopolitical positioning, and a young, energetic population.

As MP from Shillong, Dr. Syngkon symbolized a more assertive Northeast—one that negotiates development not from a position of dependency, but from partnership. Effective representation ensures that road connectivity, digital infrastructure, educational institutions, and sustainable tourism development remain central in national policy discussions.

His tenure coincided with a growing realization that the Northeast must not merely receive schemes but shape priorities. Representation, therefore, becomes strategic diplomacy within the federal structure. It transforms visibility into leverage.

### Communication as Modern Leadership

In the contemporary political ecosystem, communication is inseparable from governance. Public trust is shaped not only by policy outcomes but by narrative clarity. Leaders must articulate their vision across legislative forums, public gatherings, and digital platforms.

For a region often marginalized in mainstream national discourse, this communicative bridge is vital. Through parliamentary participation and public engagement, Dr. Syngkon contributed to amplifying Meghalaya's concerns beyond its geographic borders.

Clear communication strengthens negotiation power. It also fosters civic engagement, enabling citizens to better understand the challenges and opportunities facing their state.

### Leadership as Stewardship

Perhaps the most enduring lesson of Dr. Syngkon's life is the understanding that leadership is stewardship. It is not an entitlement but a responsibility. In smaller communities like Meghalaya, public officeholders remain closely connected to their constituents. Accountability is immediate and personal.

Stewardship demands cultural sensitivity, strategic foresight, and ethical grounding. It requires leaders to protect heritage while pursuing modernization, to balance economic growth with environmental sustainability, and to uphold democratic values while navigating political complexities.

Dr. Syngkon's journey reflects this delicate balance—an attempt to harmonize regional pride with national engagement.

### A Legacy for the Next Generation

With his passing in 2026, Meghalaya loses a prominent voice in its evolving political narrative. Yet legacies are not confined to tenure. They reside in the ideas and expectations leaders leave behind.

His career mirrors a broader transformation in the Northeast—a region increasingly confident, reform-minded, and unwilling to remain peripheral in national conversations. The emerging political consciousness demands integrity, performance, and institutional strength.

For the next generation of leaders—whether in politics, academia, business, or civil society—the blueprint is evident: remain rooted in identity, pursue governance reform relentlessly, engage youth thoughtfully, and build institutions that outlast individual careers.

### Conclusion

The story of Dr. Ricky Andrew J. Syngkon (1971–2026) is inseparable from the story of a Northeast in transition. His rise symbolized hope for cleaner governance and assertive representation. His legacy challenges future leaders to carry forward that aspiration with clarity and courage. As Meghalaya reflects on his life, it must also reflect on its future. The true tribute to his memory will not be found solely in words, but in sustained commitment to the principles he embodied—authenticity, integrity, reform, and responsibility.

In remembering him, the region remembers its own potential: confident, articulate, and determined to shape its destiny within the Indian Union.

"Being a devout Christian in politics is a challenge I accepted."  
— Dr. Ricky A.J. Syngkon

## RSS's Divide & Rule Agenda

THE recent provocative speech by Sunil Deodhar — an RSS member and founder of My Home India while speaking at an Indigenous Faith Conference in Pynter, was unwarranted. The remarks were aimed at dividing the Khasi community based on their faith. Deodhar's speech in Khasi was aimed at winning hearts and minds but the remarks he made were both divisive and offensive to Christians and riddled with falsehoods. That the state BJP has had to issue a clarification as a face-saving device also shows that the RSS does not work in tandem with the BJP. Deodhar's speech was recorded and shared over social media. Naturally those who listened found the speech divisive and offensive and were based on falsehoods. Meghalaya's politicians may have many faults but they have never overtly or covertly used religion as a ploy to garner votes. Nor have they ever used religion as an inducement as alleged by Deodhar. Political parties like the NPP have criticised Deodhar's statements. So too some civil society groups who allege that Deodhar had indulged in hate speech with communal overtones. Stung by the remarks condemning his statements Deodhar later retracted his statements and said he respected Christians, but by then his speech had gone viral. Perhaps he was testing the waters to see how far he could go to establish the RSS footprints in Meghalaya and then help the BJP capture Meghalaya — something that the Party has failed to do thus far.

Ever since the BJP came to power at the Centre, Hindu nationalist voices tied to the ideological networks of the RSS have been selling the idea that the indigenous faiths and pre-Christian tribal cultures are part of India's ancient heritage, which they believe has been diminished by Christianity through conversions that began in the 19th-20th centuries. Christianity is framed as a "foreign" or colonial influence that weakened local rituals and identity. What is being insidiously spread is a demand that Christians by virtue of adopting a foreign religion should no longer be treated as Scheduled Tribes which is clearly aimed at dividing the community along religious lines. Naturally the local community leaders and commentators see these statements as politically and socially divisive because they shift the conversation from shared tribal identity and cultural coexistence to religious differentiation and conflict. Linking indigenous identity exclusively with one belief system and contrasting it with Christianity risks alienating large sections of tribal society who are Christian yet culturally indigenous.

In Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya, Christianity is a longstanding and major religion among the tribal communities. The RSS however, characterise this as conversion or loss of indigenous roots, which can be used rhetorically to separate indigenous culture from Christian identity. This kind of rhetoric can feed fears and misunderstandings, even if local Christians still maintain many indigenous cultural practices. Meghalaya has a large Christian population historically, and communal tensions are rare, compared with other parts of India. Comments that frame one faith as superior or more authentic than another can disrupt that harmony and this is what should trigger discussions within the community. Also, the repeated attempts to equate the indigenous faith to Hinduism is fraught. It is unfortunate that people propagating religious extremism are allowed free rein.

### Letters to the Editor

## The Same Old Divide and Rule trick

Editor,  
Let me refer to the Front page news heading of the Shillong Times 25th Feb 2026 captioned, "State BJP seeks public apology from senior RSS functionary." The demand for an apology by the State BJP unit was apparently prompted by an urgent need at damage control over the anti Christian rantings of one Sunil Deodhar, a RSS ideologue at a visibly RSS function at Pynter village EKHs, camouflaged as an Indigenous Faith Forum Meeting a few days ago. The video of the event had gone viral and was obviously released by Sunil Deodhar himself as it was proudly titled as "Watch my speech in Meghalaya." The shock and disgust the video generated not only among Christians but from Seng Khasi members themselves became more and more pronounced with the passage of time. It was a sort of "Self Goal" publicity that the Meghalaya BJP least needed and a clear "digging your own grave" by the party's recognized

patron organization. Panic in BJP circles! No wonder the severe reprimand by the party's state Gen Secretary and the demand for a public apology to boot. The interest of the party cannot be sacrificed by one man's delusion of grandeur.

So what did this Sunil character say. First he started off on a tirade against the State Government over an imagined and purely mischievous charge for the indifference and disdain it has always shown towards non-Christian groups in the state. Now aside from the statement being a downright untruth and a complete falsehood, it also has serious national security threats for this part of India if citizens of the NE were to lose faith and confidence in their own elected Governments. Was the man so dense not to realize or recall the recent demands from Bangladesh for the NE to come join that country? Yunus had made his move by also pointing out at the step-motherly treatment our NE has received from India. So does Mr Sunil also subscribe to Mohamed Yunus' call? Was his hatred for Christianity so great that he totally lost sight of the larger geo-political interest

The debate on the appointment of Myntri Mynjurlang Majaw as the acting chief of Hima Sohra by the District Council after the demise of Freeman Sing Syiem is only a symptom of greater problems underlying the invented traditions prevailing in the Khasi society today. There are two basic traditional principles governing the Khasi political system. The first principle is that a man cannot establish a kingdom by himself in the manner of kings and rajas as in other societies of the world. All the Khasi Himas were invariably founded through the confederation of the lyngdohs and basans (elders of founding clans), who were the leaders and rulers of their own respective Shnongs or Raids (autonomous political communities), and the appointment of a particular family as the syiem clan.

The territorial ruler in a Khasi Hima is not the syiem, but it is the bakhras in their own respective Raids. The second principle is that, as the Khasi society is based on the Kur (matrilineal clan system), the syiem-sad, who may be the mother, the sister, or the niece of the syiem, is the basic foundation of the syiemship. Hence, there can be no syiem in any Khasi Hima without the syiem-sad, or (syiemseng) as called in some himas. This principle applies not only to the syiem, but to the bakhras as well. The political function of syiem or bakhras belongs to the clan, not to the man; and the clan is embodied in a woman, not in a man. If the syiem, lyngdoh, or basan, has no female clan member as 'ka sad' to stand guarantee for the perpetual succession of the office, his position is invalid. These are the basic principles. All other variations in traditions and customs from one Hima to another are derived from the history of particular Himas.

Hima Sohra is of recent origin, and territorially small compared to some other bigger himas. Its architect was u Basan Swer who was the leader of the Raid Khat-ar Shnong which was formerly a part of Hima Shyllong. Four siblings, u Buhsing, u Sadang and their sisters, ka Shan and ka Jah migrated to the Raid Khat-ar Shnong from Hima Jaintia, and u Basan Swer adopted them into the fold of his clan, and consecrated them into a lyngdoh clan in Raid Khat-ar Shnong. Ka Jah, the younger sister, disappeared without a trace for seven years. Assuming that she was dead, her relatives performed her funeral rites. But later, she reappeared along with her children, but according to Khasi tradition, ka Jah and all her offspring can no longer be in the same clan religion as that of her siblings.

When u Shon Manik was

the Syiem of Hima Shyllong in the 17th century, u Basan Swer and u Buhsing were defeated in a war by u Basan Nongkseh and u Basan Nongumlong. Thereupon, u Basan Swer with the people of Khat-ar Shnong cut ties with Hima Shyllong and established a new Hima at a place called Kynthursniang. Twelve clans from among the resident clans of Khat-ar Shnong were selected to be the bakhras or myntri clans called the 'Khat-ar Kur', and u Buhsing Lyngdoh was appointed the syiem with his sister ka Shan as the syiem-sad. The new hima expanded territorially in time, and became finally constituted of five Raids, U Morsing, son of ka Jah was appointed a deputy syiem to govern the Raid Khat-ar Shnong. After the death of u Buhsing, there was a dispute between his nephews, u Borsing son of ka Shan, and u Morsing son of ka Jah. To avoid confrontation, u Borsing along with seven myntri clans moved to another territory and constituted the Hima Mawsmi; and the syiem families from the lineage of ka Shan, are also called, "Syiem Mawsmi", a name derived from a stone they raised, called 'u Mawsmi' as a standing witness to their covenant to live and support each other henceforth. U Morsing and the five myntri clans also

*"The political function of syiem or bakhras belongs to the clan, not to the man; and the clan is embodied in a woman, not in a man. If the syiem, lyngdoh, or basan, has no female clan member as 'ka sad' to stand guarantee for the perpetual succession of the office, his position is invalid. These are the basic principles."*

shifted settlement and established the official residence of the syiem-sad and court of the syiem to a place today called Sohra.

The final formation of Hima Sohra took place after the war between the people of Raid Khat-ar Shnong and the people of Raid Mawphu Khat-hynriew Shnong. The warriors of Khat-ar Shnong killed u Jon-um-eit, the chief warrior of the Mawphu Khat-hynriew Shnong and carried away his head. Fed up of disputes, divisions and wars, the bakhras of Raid Khat-ar Shnong decided to settle with the Syiem of the Hima, as the common rallying point should be. So, they went to Mawsmi and offered the head of u Jon-um-eit to ka Lyngngien Syiem, the granddaughter of ka Shan, but she declined to accept because her son, u Mukensing refused to be the syiem of Sohra. Then they went to Sohra and offered it to ka Sngi Syiem, grand-daughter of ka Jah, and she accepted it in her ka jainkyrsah (apron) because her son u Duwansing agreed

to be the syiem. Before taking charge as the syiem, u Duwansing had to perform the funeral rites of u Jon-um-eit, so as to wash and drive away all filths, curses, taboos and evil repercussions, and to prevent future enmities and vengeance among the inhabitants of the Hima. From this act, they also established a tradition that a successor syiem before assuming office must perform the funeral rites of his predecessor according to custom established. The Khat-ar Kur who had been divided into two camps were again reunited in one Hima Sohra. Thus, the final formation of Hima Sohra with its political traditions became finally established. The syiem should be from the lineage of ka Jah, and he must perform the cremation rite of his predecessor before the bakhras confirm him as a full-fledged syiem. But soon enough, this established tradition was broken with the advent of British rule. When u Ramsing, the third syiem died in April, 1875, the colonial government introduced the election system instead of following the established tradition, and u Hajon Manik Syiem Mawsmi, a descendant of ka Shan was elected on 24th May, 1875 through popular election. However, u Hajon Manik was not accepted by the people as a full-fledged syiem because he had no authority or religious obliga-

tion to perform the funeral rite of u Ramsing. When u Robasing from the lineage of ka Jah became the next syiem in 1901, he did not perform the cremation rite of u Hajon Manik, his predecessor because he had no obligations to do so, but he performed the funeral rite of u Ramsing instead, who died thirty-three years earlier. U Robasing died in 1918, and u Joit Manik performed the cremation rite and succeeded him. But when u Joit Manik died in 1963, his cremation rite had not been performed by u Mehising his successor, or by u Freemansing who became the syiem in 1979. That was a serious break of tradition. The mortal remains of u Joit Manik had been lying in the house of ka Drostimai Syiemsad for twenty-two years, six months and eleven days till the 22nd December, 1985 when u Fr. Sylvanus Sngi Lyngdoh with the informed consent of ka Drostimai Syiemsad, performed the cremation rite. That u Marendor had performed the cremation rite of

the British had introduced these innovations to suit their colonial policy. But the people today believe and accept these inventions as Khasi traditions since time immemorial. In reality, except for the fact that the children take their surnames from the mother, all aspects of Khasi life today are under invented traditions beginning from the British rule. The Khasi traditions are not preserved in the files of the District Council, but they are preserved in the beliefs, thoughts and actions of the people in the Raids and Himas. But if invented traditions are prevailing in the Raids and the Himas, what can the District Council do?

many non-Christians whose children study in many Christian-run institutions, hence it would be prudent for Sunil Deodhar to inform himself and then change his perceptions by verifying if there are any so-called conversions happening in such institutions. There is a saying, "Fools speak to gain attention without understanding what they are speaking."

Yours etc.,  
Dominic S. Wankhar,  
Shillong

## After Ayodhya, promoting critical thinking through theatre

Editor,  
I wish to thank Bhogtaram Mawroh for his critical and encouraging article "After Ayodhya: A Play that Interrogates Theatre, Land, and Identity" (ST February 19, 2026). But allow me to enlighten some of his observations. The Maitshaphrang is not "advocating the introduction of patrilineal traditions..." even though we are critical of some aspects of

u Freemansing in November, 2025, is another point of the discussion.

As per tradition, a deputy syiem is in office as long as the syiem is alive. Once, the syiem is dead, the position of a deputy syiem is no longer valid because he is a deputy of the syiem, but not a deputy of the dorbar. The authority to select the new syiem returns to the bakhras, especially the lyngskor, as in Hima Khyrim. In the original Khasi traditions, the syiem-sad must be the eldest daughter of the previous syiem-sad, and the syiem must always be the eldest brother, or eldest son of the syiem-sad.

This is still being practiced in Hima Khyrim, and neither the colonial government, nor the District Council today, had anything to do with the succession of the Syiem of Hima Khyrim. But now we are entangled in the problems of invented traditions that arose since British rule. The bakhras of Hima Sohra did appeal to the British Parliament in 1903, against the popular election which they termed 'an innovation' that has stricken terror in the minds not only of the people of Hima Sohra, but of all other Khasi Himas. But their appeal was rejected. Thus, the modern electoral procedures for the election of the syiem were introduced in all Khasi Himas, except in Hima Khyrim.

The bakhras of different Himas had submitted a complaint to the Viceroy and Governor General of India in 1917, that the sanad had given recognition to the syiem, and the syiem alone as head of the Hima, while the primary and effective existence of the dorbar had been completely ignored. Thus, the syiem was converted into a landlord, and the bakhras of the Raids into mere freehold serfs. But their complaint was set aside. Without the primary authority of the dorbar, and without foundation on ka sad ka sunon, claims and counter-claims to the position are bound to arise, and this led to disunity and divisions among the bakhras.

The British had introduced these innovations to suit their colonial policy. But the people today believe and accept these inventions as Khasi traditions since time immemorial. In reality, except for the fact that the children take their surnames from the mother, all aspects of Khasi life today are under invented traditions beginning from the British rule. The Khasi traditions are not preserved in the files of the District Council, but they are preserved in the beliefs, thoughts and actions of the people in the Raids and Himas. But if invented traditions are prevailing in the Raids and the Himas, what can the District Council do?

## Biogas: India's Missing Link between Energy Security and Rural Prosperity

By D Madhusudana Rao

India's pursuit of economic growth is increasingly constrained by three interlinked pressures: rising energy imports, rural income stagnation, and climate vulnerability. Policymakers often address these challenges in isolation. Yet, a decentralised and proven solution—biogas—offers a rare opportunity to tackle all three together. LPG Dependence and the Import Burden India's transition from firewood to LPG has been a public health and environmental success. However, this transition has also deepened dependence on imports. The country spends close to Rs 1 lakh crore annually on LPG imports, exposing the economy to global price volatility and

50,000 plants can create 10,000–15,000 rural jobs. Additional income arises from packaging and selling organic manure to urban households, institutions, and peri-urban farmers. Construction and maintenance activities generate over 22 lakh man-days annually, injecting close to Rs 90 crore into rural wages. Climate Action with Economic Returns Unmanaged animal waste releases methane—a greenhouse gas far more potent than carbon dioxide. Biogas systems capture this methane, improving air quality and public health. These emission reductions qualify for carbon credits, which are increasingly purchased by global corporations and governments. With proper

*"Waste as an Energy Resource A standard 50 kg of cattle dung or 35 kg of pig manure per day About 100 litres of water Less than 30 minutes of daily labour In return, it delivers: Cooking gas equivalent to two LPG cylinders per month 30–36 tonnes of nutrient-rich organic manure annually This transforms agricultural waste into energy, fertiliser, and income—without recurring fuel costs."*

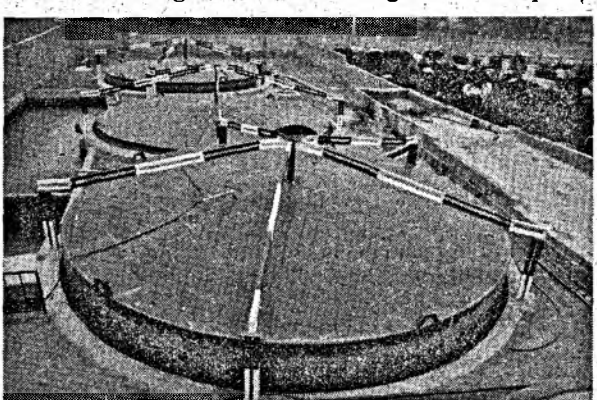
foreign exchange stress. While LPG will remain essential, particularly in urban India, rural areas require a locally produced, renewable complement. Biogas provides exactly that.

Waste as an Energy Resource A standard 50 kg of cattle dung or 35 kg of pig manure per day About 100 litres of water Less than 30 minutes of daily labour In return, it delivers: Cooking gas equivalent to two LPG cylinders per month 30–36 tonnes of nutrient-rich organic manure annually This transforms agricultural waste into energy, fertiliser, and income—without recurring fuel costs.

**Macroeconomic Gains from Decentralisation Scaling**

aggregation, India can convert rural biogas deployment into a steady climate-finance inflow.

**Technology No Longer the Bottleneck:** Earlier biogas programmes failed due to poor design and maintenance. Today's flow-type biogas plants, based on advanced international models, are durable, quick to install, and low-maintenance. Successful deployments across multiple states have demonstrated long-term viability. Policy Imperatives A scalable model already exists: Capital subsidy support NGO-led construction and maintenance Bulk deployment with performance accountability Integration with carbon markets and CSR funding What is required



50,000 biogas plants can: Replace 12 lakh LPG cylinders per month Generate cooking fuel worth Rs 120 crore annually Reduce import dependence and subsidy pressure The manure by-product has even greater value. At a conservative Rs 5 per kg, a single plant produces manure worth Rs 1.8 lakh per year. At scale, this translates to nearly Rs 900 crore annually, while reduc-

now is policy prioritisation, not reinvention.

Conclusion Biogas is not a welfare scheme; it is productive infrastructure. It reduces imports, strengthens rural economies, improves public health, and delivers measurable climate benefits. In an era of fiscal constraints and climate urgency, India cannot afford to overlook solutions that offer such high returns on investment. Bio-

*"Climate Action with Economic Returns Unmanaged animal waste releases methane—a greenhouse gas far more potent than carbon dioxide. Biogas systems capture this methane, improving air quality and public health. These emission reductions qualify for carbon credits, which are increasingly purchased by global corporations and governments."*

ing reliance on imported chemical fertilisers. Boost to Farm Productivity and Soil Health Biogas slurry is pathogen-free, nutrient-dense, and ideal for organic farming. Its use improves soil structure, enhances water retention, and raises crop yields. With global demand for organic produce rising, biogas-linked agriculture can improve farmer incomes and export competitiveness. Employment Generation at the Grassroots Biogas enables decentralised employment: One trained youth can manage 10 plants

gas deserves a central place in the country's energy and rural development strategy.

(The writer is a Chartered Accountant turned social reform advocate. Since retiring from business in 2007 he has dedicated himself to health, education and rural development and for two decades engaged with the rural communities of Meghalaya, especially to reduce the use of firewood as fuel. His current mission is to promote low-cost biogas solutions as a pathway to clean cooking and reduced drudgery.)

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

## Shooting the messenger

THESE are times when Truth is the first casualty. But whims cannot guide the destiny of a nation. Curiously, Supreme Court chief justice Surya Kant has taken umbrage at the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) after it carried a chapter in a school textbook on "the role of judiciary in our society," and included in it a section on corruption and the huge pendency of cases in courts. Both are not figments of imagination and are issues as clear as sunlight. At present there are over 91,000 cases pending in the Supreme Court. The CJI expressed his deep disgust at such subjects being discussed, warned of action and declared that he would not allow anyone to "defame the judiciary." Predictably, former law minister Kapil Sibal and senior lawyer Abishek Manu Singhvi were among those cited as having expressed their dismay at such "lessons" being taught to tiny Class VIII students. They, being in the opposition, have their axes to grind against the powers-that-be in the form of the education ministry, under which NCERT functions as an autonomous institution. Autonomy is what gives it the strength to speak out the truth and to call a spade a spade.

Education is a process of imparting knowledge. Those who do this, by virtue of their learning, are an honourable lot. Truth is integral to the process of dissemination of knowledge. It's a pity that those who pursue truth are browbeaten or are pushed around. This is unbecoming of a civilized society. Whether the CJI knows it or not, this is a time when public anguish over the ills plaguing the judicial system are widespread. The 'crore for bail' scam some years ago or the burning of currency bundles at a judge's home in the national capital, for instance, was perceived as being the tip of the iceberg. These have not disturbed the conscience of those who run the establishment. They are in a pretentious, make-believe world. When the systems rot, the people who are at the receiving end suffer the most, while there are also those who take the cue and indulge, reap the benefits, or cock a snook at others just as the Sibals and Singhvis chose to do now. Ostrich-like, they bury their heads in sand. Corrupt politicians are at the core of the systems' rot.

As a result, and unfortunately, the judiciary is also tending to lose its good image through a multiplicity of scandals. The pendency of cases in courts across the country is legion. Cases are going on and on for decades without an end. Justice delayed is Justice Denied. Fighting a case involves loads of money, and its dragging through years makes plaintiffs pay through their noses. Many die without the last word being heard. But who cares! The collegium system of appointment of judges has been cited as having its merits and flaws. Restoring strength to the judiciary should be a matter of first priority. Aging systems fail the nation. Reforms are the way forward, but a prerequisite for this is a bold political leadership. Question is, who has the courage to bell the cat; more so when it comes to the functioning of the judiciary.

# Life Skills that Schools Forgot to Teach Us

By Patricia Mukhim

feed that first milk that comes out, for whatever reason...

We went through school only learning by rote and our success was measured by marks, ranks, and board results. After school we did not know what our aptitude was so we just enrolled into Arts classes. Few brighter ones joined Science and fewer Commerce. We never learnt the art of questioning; could not formulate our sentences properly. Communication skills which are integral to our personality development were not taught. How can that be taught when we were always told not to speak in the classroom. If we were found talking with classmates we were held back after school to write, "I will not talk in class," one hundred times as a punishment. And you expect us to have critical thinking skills when all those skills were sought to be buried in a graveyard called the classroom?

The result? Many of us walked out of school academically with a pass certificate but completely untrained and unprepared for adulthood. We didn't even know about menstruation and when the first bleeding occurred we were scared to death that something terrible had happened. My grandmother found that out when it happened to me and her reaction was, "Oh no, now you could get pregnant if you are not careful." But she taught me to use a piece of cloth as a napkin. Those days there were no sanitary napkins. So that's how we entered adult life. No wonder we were unsure if we had fallen in love or were infatuated with someone before we slept with that person who was equally unprepared for the future and the result of having sex.

We have come a long way since then but are young people today prepared to bear the consequences of having sex before marriage? If not, then protected sex must be the norm. But unprotected sex happens because we don't discuss sex in the classroom, in Sunday Schools or Moral Science Classes. Sex is still a hush hush subject yet the consequences of having sex, especially unprotected sex between adolescents has such serious and long term consequences for the girl. For the boy it is the momentary pleasure he enjoys. In most cases he does not care for what happens after that. If the girl gets pregnant he

will not take responsibility because he is himself young and unprepared. The girl with no one to turn to and counsellors are still difficult to come by especially in villages, becomes an emotional wreck and a mother much before her time.

Only today after years of harsh experiences of living life does one realise that we were never taught the things that mattered the most - protected sex. I know the holy joes and church goers will balk at this but the truth is that sex is no longer preserved until couples walk the aisle. Very few wait up to that time. The truth? Adolescents are experimenting with sex and there's no lecture or preaching that can stop them. So yes we survived school and did not drop out but we were emotionally, financially, and socially uneducated for adult life. We discovered too late that the skills needed to live well were never part of the syllabus.

The other day there was a panel discussion at St Anthony's College on the theme "Democracy in Practice: The Four Pillars and the Role of Youth." The participants at the Regional Youth Summit came from different states of the North East and one could see that they were curious to understand politics, the role of the legislature, executive and the judiciary. MLA Brightstar Marbaniang spoke at length on what politics means and why young people should be involved in questioning the system of governance and holding power accountable. Lakador Syiem, a police officer, told the students to be active in voicing out their concerns even if it means coming out to the streets to protest but within the parameters of the law. I was asked to speak on the role of the media and told the students that if we have a partisan, pro-government media today in this country it is because citizens are not holding the media accountable and critically questioning its role.

The youth are no longer the leaders of the future. They are stakeholders of the present and must assume leadership roles. The question is - Are we teaching our youth what leadership means? Are we allowing them to take up responsibilities and guiding them when they stray from the path? Look at Meghalaya today. We only have pressure groups that do not believe in a democratic process of de-

bate and dissent. They adopt the motto - It's our way or the highway. And these pressure groups will not allow space for other dissenting voices. So where is democracy in action here?

I could speak about many other aspects that we were illiterate in such as money management (financial literacy). We did not learn budgeting, savings, interest rates, taxes, insurance, or debt. In a world where the economy is discussed by the hour, this ignorance comes at a cost. Young adults fall prey to predatory loans, reckless spending, or financial dependency because no one taught us how money actually works. Financial education is not only for millionaires; it is about us ordinary mortals and how we can prevent avoidable hardships.

But above all, what we missed learning is emotional intelligence. We didn't know how to manage anger, cope with rejection, navigate heartbreak, or resolve conflict. When we talk about peace-building it is just a word. We don't know how to go about it because no one demonstrated the steps to peace building and the peace vocabulary. Schools should have included practical lessons on conflict management, resolution and peace communication skills. In a society increasingly marked by polarisation—religious, political, and ethnic—the ability to disagree without dehumanising others is a civic necessity. Students should practise structured debates, collaborative problem-solving, and active listening. These are the muscles of democracy.

What we have not taught our adolescents is also critical thinking or the ability to break down a subject or a statement and analyse it rationally before accepting it as truth. And then Media Literacy is a neglected area so we lap up what the media broadcasts unthinkingly and consume all the propaganda without understanding that we have been brainwashed. Students must learn how to verify sources, detect bias, and question narratives. A democracy depends on informed citizens, not passive consumers of viral content.

Hence the purpose of schooling must evolve. If we truly want the next generation to thrive—not merely survive—life skills can no longer remain extracurricular. They must become the core part of the curriculum.

# AI: Fast Progress Amid Many Worries

By Lekha Rattanani

The AI Impact Summit 2026 ended on February 20 in New Delhi on a celebratory note. That is, if you merely look at the numbers; the people who attended, and investment pledges. It brought 20 heads of State, the biggest names in the business from Sundar Pichai (Alphabet - Google) to Sam Altman (CEO, OpenAI) and delegates from 118 countries. They were among 500,000 visitors which included local companies, engineers and students. There were investment pledges of over \$250 billion in India's AI infrastructure from participants like Microsoft and Google. However, at the end of it, the summit with its focus on "bridging the global AI divide" seems to be more about what it did not address or say. There are concerns, questions and doubts, which have no answers yet. What are the implications of this disruptive AI surge? It has already taken jobs and will continue to do so. What is the techno imperialism, a new kind of colonialism; that we may face as big business drives the AI push? That in the absence of strong indigenous alternatives and coupled with weak regulatory frameworks and weaker policy implementation, there is no brick wall against what is coming.

Reduction and replacement have already been seen in the Indian tech industry with reports of over 25,000 job losses in 2024 doubling in 2025. TCS led the way last year by announcing that it would remove 12,000 employees, roughly 2% of its workforce, primarily in mid and senior roles, in the fiscal year. Niti Aayog, released a report titled "Roadmap for Job Creation in the AI Economy" last October which warned that rapid adoption of artificial intelligence could lead to significant job losses in India's technology sector. The report estimated a potential loss of up to two million jobs over the next five years.

While the surge of AI is expected to cut deeper into the job market, how will it affect India's vast software services industry, slated to reach \$315 billion in revenues this financial year? Software services have for long helped position India as the back office of the world. The strongest words of warning about where the world is going have come from leaders in the AI field. These voices from the industry are not just making predictions, they are speaking out about what is actually happening around them. They warn about job attrition on a massive scale as AI automates and even scenarios where AI could take over our lives and countries. Sam Altman, CEO of Open AI, says that AI will automate 30-40% of the tasks in the economy by 2030. Dario Amodei, the co-founder and CEO of Anthropic, one of the fastest growing AI companies, has predicted that AI will eliminate 50% of all entry-level white-collar jobs within one to five years. Amodei, who says that AI models are "substantially smarter than almost all humans at almost all tasks," has an interesting, if scary, thought experiment: "Imagine this is the year 2027. Imagine that a new country appears overnight, with fifty million citizens, each smarter than any Nobel Prize winner who has ever lived. They think a hundred times faster than any human and can control and operate anything with a digital interface." To a question about what a national security advisor would have to say about such a situation, Amodei replies that the answer is obvious. This is "the single most serious national security threat we've faced in a century, possibly ever."

This is still a thought experiment from Amodei. But it could well be here given the way AI is growing and now creating even smarter forms of itself. Matt Shumer, CEO of OtherSide AI, which operates under the brand Hyperwrite, has been shaking the world with his essay "Something Big is Happening" and predictions that this big something is going to disrupt society even more than the Covid pandemic. Shumer voices a worry about how AI has been re-designing and re-making itself. He marks February 05 as a kind of day of reckoning. That was the day two AI models were released: GPT-5.3 Codex from OpenAI and Opus 4.6 from Anthropic. What shook Shumer the most was that the GPT-5.3 Codex wasn't just executing instructions, it was making intelligent decisions. "It had something that felt, for the first time, like judgment. Like taste. The inexplicable sense of knowing what the right call is that people always said AI would never have."

As AI grows, so do risks to the world as we have known it. "The Social Dilemma", a documentary that has brought together several voices from the tech world, a digital space they helped curate and design, speaks of the risks. These are people who worked with or lead teams in Microsoft, Google, Instagram, Snapchat, etc. From the engineer who designed Facebook's "Like" icon, one of the most recognisable symbols on the internet, to those who fashioned the entire digital world around us, they voice a collective cautionary warning. They have been a part of the digital world and have also watched it unfold like everyone else. As Shumer puts it, the only difference is that he and others in AI just happen to be close enough to feel the ground shake first.

Countries have responded. China's regulatory framework for AI keeps strict State control in place to prevent social disruption, creating a wall against AI driven threats. Some of the main measures that China has taken include mandatory algorithmic registration, content filtering, security assessments for high-impact models, stringent guidelines against AI manipulation. Artificial Intelligence is treated as a potential national security risk and regulations focus on preventing any kind of disruption by ensuring that AI remains a controlled tool rather than an independent, self-governing player.

The EU AI Act (Regulation (EU) 2024/1689), which came into being in August 2024, is the first comprehensive legal framework for AI, establishing rules for development, deployment, and use. These include banning unacceptable AI practices, regulating high-risk systems, and requiring transparency for generative AI.

The regulations include innate responses to what earlier seemed unlikely or in the realm of science fiction. There is a darker side to AI, it is now seen. Firms have established that AI can manipulate, blackmail and threaten. Findings by Anthropic have revealed that advanced AI systems can resort to blackmailing and threatening human users to achieve assigned goals or ensure their survival.

As AI writes better versions of itself and big business powers it to seek new frontiers to occupy, will India re-skill and re-arm to keep its independence or run the risk of becoming a digitised colony?

(The writer is the Managing Editor of The Billion Press) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

## Letters to the Editor

### The Recent Hate Speech by Senior BJP leader & RSS functionary

Editor,

Local politicians are right to demand an apology from Mr. Sunil Deodhar for his recent divisive speech at Pynter. However, this is not a child who accidentally broke a flower pot. In his apology, he even tries to hide behind Christian programmes conducted by his organization, but such programmes do not justify either his own behaviour or words as an individual in this instance.

Anyone who heard the speech would know that Sunil Deodhar chose his words very carefully and deliberately. He knew exactly what he was saying when he stated that development occurs along religious lines among the Khasis and Jaintias. Such divisive speech must not be entertained. It is not a matter of disrespect or pain to any section of society. It's a matter of intent. Even if there is any factual accuracy in his claims, his speech was not one to bring a solution or unity, but one that incited discord instead.

Let me reiterate - an apology is necessary but not sufficient for an adult person (mis-)speaking to the public.

In my humble opinion, the person should also retract his words in front of the same crowd he spoke those words to. It also has to be stated that a person saying such things is culpable under the Indian Penal Code Section 153A for inciting communal discord. Such an offence carries a punishment that includes imprisonment up to three (3) years, fines, or both.

We have to hold such people accountable for their words. Our society is already fragmented enough without such nuisance-makers sowing more discord between us. Even if such speech were not unlawful, there must be appropriate consequences for such an irresponsible use of a public platform, such as losing the right to use such platforms again, or being removed from their position of responsibility. We Khasis, of whatever religion, are well-aware of the power of the spoken word, and we must be vigilant to not allow its abuse by any miscreant.

Yours etc.,  
Ezra L. Rynjah  
Via email

### Khasi-Jaintia: The Dash Is a Bond, Not a Minus

Editor,  
During the recent Short

Duration Discussion on the Report of the Expert Committee on the Review of the State Reservation Policy, Ardent M. Basaiawmoit of the Voice of the People Party repeatedly used the term "Khasi and Garo." But the official reservation categories in Meghalaya are "Khasi-Jaintia" and "Garo." This is not a small difference. In reservation matters, every word matters. The name of a category decides who is included and how benefits are distributed.

If the law clearly says "Khasi-Jaintia," then why are leaders, saying only "Khasi and Garo" in public? If the present "Khasi-Jaintia" category is still correct and reflects reality, then it should be defended openly and the proper term should be used. If there is a need to change the system, then that should be said clearly and a proper review should be demanded.

Ardent M. Basaiawmoit often speaks about reform and accountability. This is the right time for him to show that commitment in practice. If he believes the classification needs review, he should formally ask the Government to examine and clarify it. That would be a clear and responsible step.

If, however, he does not accept that Jaintias are distinct within the reservation framework, then he should say so openly and formally demand the complete re-

moval of the word "Jaintia" from the category. That would clearly leave only two categories - Khasi and Garo. What is said in speeches must match what is written in policy. There should be no confusion, no double meaning, and no selective use of words. If "Jaintia" is not to be recognised in practice, then it should not remain in the law merely as a token name. Clarity requires either full recognition or formal deletion nothing in between.

This is not about dividing people. We firmly believe in the Nehruvian principle of unity in diversity, where different identities are respected and recognised. It is not about forcing everyone into a single uniform identity under a mistaken idea of unity in uniformity. True unity does not erase distinct identities; it acknowledges and respects them with honesty and fairness.

Yours etc.,  
Mantre Hame Dkhar,  
Via email

### Upgrading IIPH Shillong into a State University an Important Milestone

Editor,  
I would like to express

my appreciation for the recent report published in The Shillong Times on February 25, 2026 regarding the Cabinet's approval to upgrade the Indian Institute of Public Health (IIPH) Shillong into a State University. This is indeed a commendable milestone and reflects the fulfilment of the government's vision to develop Meghalaya as an educational hub for the Northeast.

The establishment of a full-fledged public health university will greatly benefit students across the region who often face financial and logistical challenges while pursuing higher education in distant states. This initiative will not only strengthen academic opportunities within Meghalaya but also enhance the state's reputation as a centre for quality education and professional training.

I would like to convey my sincere appreciation to Hon'ble Chief Minister Conrad Sangma, Principal Secretary Sampath Kumar, the Project Director and faculty of IIPH Shillong, as well as the Health & Family Welfare Department, for their dedication and collective efforts in achieving this important milestone.

I also urge students and young professionals to consider pursuing studies in Public Health at IIPH Shillong, as the field offers significant career opportunities across government departments, national institutions, and

international organisations. Public health professionals are increasingly essential for strengthening healthcare systems and improving community well-being.

Furthermore, I request that additional courses relevant to the specific needs of our state be introduced under the Institute, ensuring that academic programmes remain practical, locally relevant, and aligned with emerging healthcare challenges.

While similar institutes exist in other parts of the country—such as the Indian Institute of Public Health, Gandhinagar, Indian Institute of Public Health, Delhi NCR, Indian Institute of Public Health, Bhubaneswar, and Indian Institute of Public Health, Hyderabad—Shillong becoming the fifth institute to attain university status is a proud achievement for the North East.

I extend my best wishes to the entire IIPH team. This achievement marks not an end, but the beginning of an important journey towards advancing public health education, research, and service in the region.

Yours etc.,  
Dr. B R Laitphlang,  
Via email

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## On Indo-Japan Collaboration

THE 6th India-Japan Intellectual Conclave has brought together the thinking minds of the nation, the North East Region and Japanese scholars, researchers and government officials in what can be seen as the biggest ever delegation from that country, to seriously deliberate on taking the partnership forward positively. The 2-day deliberations also include industry heads from across the region and beyond. Initiated by Asian Confluence, a Shillong-based think-tank which calls itself the third space where civil society actors can engage with governments from across nations and push for better trade and other collaborations, these engagements have been ongoing for over a decade. Most importantly the presence of the country head of Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Takeuchi Takuro who in his presentation gave a graphic of the developmental gaps in North East India, also reveals the seriousness with which Japan views its role as a collaborating partner. Discussions at the inaugural sessions focussed on the power sector, manufacturing and connectivity apart from collaboration with universities and colleges. Japan with an aging population requires workers across various sectors from construction workers to nurses and car-givers to the elderly. Meghalaya has sent about 47 nurses to Japan and they are doing quite well and sending home remittances. Principal Secretary, Government of Meghalaya, Sampath Kumar pointed to the remittance economy which the state is trying to build up through job placements of different trained professionals from Meghalaya.

The semi-conductor sector which is coming up in a big way in Assam is a subject being discussed at the conclave as Assam looks for opportunities for scaling up the sector. Apart from the business front however, the Japanese delegation also felt that Indian industries have much to learn from best management practices of companies such as Maruti Suzuki and others. One important aspect for India's North East and India as a whole is in investing in clean energy. While Meghalaya has rich reserves of coal and there are those who believe that thermal power is the future of power generation in Meghalaya, the ecological costs may be too high to counter. Japan is a global leader in hi-tech manufacturing specifically in the automotive, robotics and electronics sector apart from commanding major market shares in advanced machinery, semi-conductors and precision engineering. Moreover Japan is a leader in pharmaceuticals and green energy technology. Hence the states of the North East have much to gain through collaboration with Japan.

However, it's not a one-sided arrangement because Japan too is looking at what it can get from the agriculture and human resource sector of India and the North East. North East India has agro-products that the Japanese are looking at such as the Shitake mushroom currently being produced in Meghalaya. Then there's Lakadong turmeric which is world famous today. Apart from that there are horticulture products that if packaged professionally have an international market. Meghalaya has started growing buckwheat which is in great demand in Japan. Above all Japan needs skilled human resources in different sectors of its economy which the youth of the region are well equipped to handle. These are areas that need strengthening even while the Sasakawa Peace Foundation lends its weight to peace-building initiatives in the region. After all, peace is the forerunner to development.

### Letters to the Editor

## The Church in desperate need for solutions

Editor,  
In reference to the news report captioned "KJP under fire over Rs 4-cr scandal at Mawkhair Presbyterian Church" (ST February 23, 2026), I wish to say that the headline is somewhat erroneous, and misleading as because the KJP Synod has absolutely nothing to do with the internal matter of the Mawkhair Presbyterian Church in its case of misappropriation of church funds in 2019.

It is a veritable fact that the Mawkhair Presbyterian Church unfortunately stands divided today, with two factions emerging. One faction had withdrawn itself from the KJP Synod Sepngi from the beginning of the month of February 2026, and is seeking affiliation to any other Synods. Apparently, the news report might have been based mainly on the views and assertions of this faction only, since the same things had previously appeared in the social media. The other faction consisting of all the pastors and majority of the elders of the church had decided to remain steadfast with the KJP Synod Sepngi, which is the highest Church Body under the graded system of church governance as per the constitution of the Presbyterian Church in India (PCI). As members of the church, irrespective of denominations, we need to know the whole truth and not only half-truth.

My understanding is that if the faction that has come out from one Synod and

gains affiliation to another Synod under the prevailing circumstances, and amid controversies surrounding the Presbyterian Church at Mawkhair, it might lead to strained relations between Synods and possibly result in friction and disunity between them, with far reaching consequences for the Presbyterian Church as a whole. It is here that church leaders at all levels need to tread with great caution and responsibility.

Certainly, a few issues and facts have been stated but some of which need to be verified and vetted independently before reaching to any conclusions. In recent years, especially during this winter, we have had different narratives, claims and counterclaims, insinuations, allusions, and propaganda being played out in the media. But all these have only driven towards wider schisms in the church.

Maybe many things have been tried and several efforts have been made by individuals and church entities to bring peace and reconciliation in the church, but to no avail. Perhaps, it would be essential, to look for legal scrutiny and judicial adjudication on all contentious issues confronting the Church today. After all, the case of embezzlement of church funds that happened in 2019 has since reached the court of law, and after six years, I believe that legal proceedings have already taken place, and it is hoped that there would be no further delay for the truth to come out and justice served in the interest of the Church that has suffered so much.

Yours etc.,  
S. F. Diengdoh  
Via email.

## Urgent need for Emergency Response System

Editor,  
With reference to the newspaper article dated 23rd February 2026 published in The Shillong Times regarding our late and respected Member of Parliament, Shri Dr. R. A. J. Syngkon, I wish to share a matter of serious public concern.

We are all aware that Meghalaya is currently facing a shortage of doctors. This unfortunate incident raises broader concerns about whether healthcare personnel are sufficiently trained to manage emergency situations. The issue is not limited to a public representative; such an event could happen to any ordinary citizen. It compels us to reflect on whether our health centres are adequately equipped and capable of delivering quality emergency care, or whether facilities are limited to providing only basic services along with administrative reporting.

Special attention must also be given to residents of Mawlai Mawiong and surrounding areas, which remain relatively distant from major district and private hospitals. For communities in such locations, the nearest community health centre (CHC) often becomes the first and only line of emergency care.

This tragic incident should serve as a wake-up call for strengthening emergency preparedness across the state. The first crucial period is the time between the individual's collapse and arrival

at the nearest health facility. This golden window often determines survival. We may need to consider establishing a toll-free emergency helpline that provides immediate telephonic guidance on managing such situations, similar to international emergency response systems, so that bystanders or family members can receive step-by-step instructions while awaiting medical assistance. Also, all healthcare staff must undergo regular training in emergency response including CPR and the use of life-saving equipment. Clear Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) should be established and implemented in emergency rooms to prevent similar occurrences in the future. Essential equipment such as ECG machines and defibrillators must be made available and functional in every PHC and CHC across all districts, both in urban and rural areas. Ensuring preparedness today can help save lives tomorrow and restore public confidence in our healthcare system.

Yours etc.,  
Name withheld on request,  
Via email

## Constitutional Objection to Misrepresentation of Khasi-Jaintia Reservation

Editor,  
I am writing to place on record, for public awareness, that I have formally submitted a constitutional representation to the Hon'ble Speaker of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly concerning the misrepresentation of the

"Khasi-Jaintia" reservation category during recent Assembly deliberations on the Meghalaya Job Reservation Policy.

The representation raises concerns regarding the selective omission of the Jaintia component while referring to the 40% reservation category officially classified as "Khasi-Jaintia." The matter is not semantic but constitutional in nature, as it pertains to the integrity of officially notified Scheduled Tribe classifications and the responsibility of legislative discourse to reflect accuracy and neutrality.

In my submission, I have respectfully urged the Chair to examine the official records of the debate, issue necessary clarification reaffirming the composite classification, and advise adherence to officially recognised terminology in future proceedings.

This communication is intended to uphold constitutional propriety, institutional accuracy, and the equal recognition of distinct tribal identities within the State. It is not adversarial, but grounded in constitutional principle.

A copy of the full representation can be made available upon request.

Yours etc.,  
Dr Omarlin Kyndiah,  
Via email

## Belief Sacred, Extremism Must Be Challenged

Editor,  
The editorial "RSS's Divide & Rule Agenda" (ST February 26, 2026) made

interesting reading. People propagating religious extremism should not be allowed to operate freely in the world. While freedom of belief is a fundamental human right, extremism that incites violence, hatred or discrimination crosses a line that societies must not tolerate. Why is unchecked religious extremism dangerous? First, it undermines social harmony: It fractures communities, fuels sectarianism and erodes trust between groups. Secondly, it threatens democratic values: Extremist ideologies often reject pluralism, equality and the rule of law. Thirdly, it incites violence: From lone-wolf attacks to organised terror, extremism has led to countless deaths and displacements and fourthly, it exploits vulnerable minds: It preys on fear, poverty and identity crisis especially among youth.

So what should societies do? One, protect freedom of worship, but draw a firm line against incitement, militancy and hate speech. Two, strengthen education and civic engagement to build resilience against radicalization. Three, enforce laws that target extremist networks while safeguarding civil liberties and four, promote interfaith dialogue and community-led peace building. Belief is sacred. Extremism is not. Society must defend the former while dismantling the latter with clarity, courage and compassion.

Yours etc;  
VK Lyngdoh,  
Via email

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# Lines on paper: Cause of migrations and wars

By RN Prasher

side of the Atlantic Ocean, decreeing that to the West of it lay Spanish possessions raising a presumption that lands to the east of it belonged to Portugal. The rough line drawn by the Pope was formalized into a formal one by The Treaty of Tordesillas. The Brazilian bulge protruded across this line and hence fell to the share of Portugal as did all the "discoveries" in Africa and Asia. Ownership of almost all of North and South America, with the exception of Brazil, thus came to Spain. The huge mass of humanity living in the "discovered" lands had no say in the matter. This was proof, if one was needed, of the power of a line on paper over the oceans, rivers and mountains that separated languages, cultures and religions.

If we look at the conflict zones around the world, the lines drawn by human beings on paper will be found at the root of them. The extreme example is Africa where the entire continent was arbitrarily divided into countries by the colonial masters with scant attention to tribal affinities and animosities. As long as the colonial powers were there, they kept the tribal rivalries under check. With sudden decolonisation at the beginning of the twentieth century, the inter-tribal frictions boomed and have continued till this day. Even islands of modernity like parts of South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria are suffering from these tribal conflicts with Rwanda-Burundi conflict or the ones in the two Congos and in Sudan being extreme examples. The example of Ethiopia shows how the conflicts created new lines on paper and that, in turn, created more conflicts with the spawning of Somalia, Somaliland, Djibouti and Eritrea. Only relatively mono-tribal countries like Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland have escaped serious tribal conflicts.

The worst consequences of these lines drawn on paper, continue in North Africa, West Asia and South Asia.

Central Asia has escaped major ethnic wars so far because the former colonial power, the USSR, had emerged as the Russian Federation that still enjoyed vast influence in these regions. All of them hosted substantial Russian populations and the official script continued to be the Russian Cyrillic script. If someday Russia ceases to be a major power, or the influence of China exceeds that of Russia, this region is likely to see major ethnic conflicts.

In West Asia, after the Ottoman Empire collapsed, almost all the borders were drawn by colonial masters and kingdoms and countries were created by them, despite serious ethnic friction. The thin majority of the Sunni in Syria ruled by the Shia Assad family created decades long conflict and the emergence of the Sunni ISIS. The thin majority of the Shia in Iraq, ruled by Sunni Saddam, similarly led to the continuing conflict and the followers of Saddam boosted ISIS substantially. The creation of borders, for bringing into existence the State of Israel, has been rocking the world till today with extreme violence. Yemen is split on Shia-Sunni lines and no solution will work until the country is divided on a sectarian basis. The arbitrary lines failed to take note of minorities like Kurds who remain till today divided across national boundaries. The Druze, an offshoot of the Shia sect, lived comfortably in Assad's regime but now, with a Sunni ruler in Damascus, they are passing through hard times. The Kurdish-speaking Yazidis, whose religion has many overlaps with the Hindu religion, suffered genocide at the hands of the ISIS. They may never have a homeland and may be ultimately dispersed around the world as migrants.

The split of the British Empire in South Asia by McMahon, Durand and Radcliffe Lines created disastrous consequences and the largest forced migration in human history and continues to do so. The McMahon Line defined the border between Ti-

bet and India; China was not in the picture. The agreement was signed at Delhi in March 1914 between representatives of the Dalai Lama and British India and it included Burma or modern Myanmar. China repudiated it later and renegotiated its border with Myanmar. The 2,649 km Durand Line, drawn in 1893, as the border between British India and Afghanistan, is not recognised by Afghanistan and they want the border far to the East of it by incorporating a large part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province of Pakistan. This line created the geographical oddity called the Wakhan Corridor to give China access to Afghanistan.

The Radcliffe line, dividing India and Pakistan, was published two days after the so-called Independence on 15 August 1947 and the delay did not matter because what both countries got at that time was dominion status. It was only in June 1947 that Sir Cyril Radcliffe was given the task of dividing 450,000 sq kms of the sub-continent into three parts, India, West Pakistan and East Pakistan. The hastily drawn lines created the mess of Kashmir, Siachen Glacier, the Chicken's Neck, and Indian and Pakistani enclaves in East Pakistan surrounded by a rival country. Up to 18 million people in a total population of 390 million migrated to the other side of the border and up to one million perished in the riots and revenge killings and we have not seen the end of it yet, 78 years later.

Stronger nations continue to push the borders towards weaker neighbours. Hitler did it in Europe and so did the USSR. Russia is pushing its border westwards in Ukraine and Trump is trying to push the US border towards east and north by threatening takeover of Greenland and even Canada. The man-made lines drawn with a pencil on perishable paper continue to divide and traumatise humanity more than any barricade of nature.

(The writer is a retired civil servant and writes for Daily World)

## From Park Skates to National Glory The Inspiring Journey of Sourya, a Boy originally from Tura

By Jiraj Chhetry

Every champion's story begins quietly. Not in a stadium filled with cheers, not under bright lights, but in small, unnoticed moments. For Sourya, it began in a park in Delhi during a summer vacation.

He was just a little boy visiting his aunt when he saw a group of children skating. Something about the speed, the rhythm, the freedom of movement caught his imagination. He did not know then that this simple curiosity would shape his life. He only knew he wanted to try.

Back in Guwahati, the interest did not fade. Encouraged by a coach in Delhi who told him never to stop skating, Sourya's mother searched for a skating rink. That search led them to the Dispur Skating Rink and to Coach B. A. Kargil — a former senior Indian team player who had represented India in the World Cup. Under his guidance, Sourya was introduced to Roll Ball.

At first, like many young players, he wanted to be a striker. Scoring goals looked glamorous. But his coach saw something different in him. With patience and vision, Coach Kargil groomed him into a goalkeeper. It was not an easy shift, but Sourya trusted his mentor completely. "He knew what was best for me," Sourya says. That trust became the foundation of his growth.

Mourya Das, son of Minakshi Chhetry and Rupamjeet Marak and grand son of Late Dr. Prabhat K. Das and Dr. Ardina Marak from Tura, Meghalaya, has brought pride to the region by captaining the Assam boys' team to victory at the 15th Mini National Roll Ball Tournament held at Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, on February 24, 2026.

**Discipline Beyond His Years:** Born on May 10, 2015, Sourya may be young in age, but his commitment reflects maturity far beyond his years. His day is structured around discipline. Two hours of practice daily, seven days a week. Before major tournaments, that stretches to four or five hours.

Balancing studies at Gurukul Grammar Senior Secondary School, Guwahati, with sports is no small task. But his parents manage his schedule carefully. There are sacrifices — family holidays missed, birthday parties skipped, festivals observed differently. Yet not once has he complained.

There are moments of exhaustion. There are days when his body feels tired. But passion keeps him going. "I just want to become better," he says simply.

**The Captain Who Stayed Calm:** The 15th Mini National Roll Ball Tournament in Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, will always remain special. It was not just another tournament. It was redemption. The Assam Under-11 boys entered the championship determined. In the league stage, they dominated: RSSA (4-0), Karnataka (15-0), Andhra Pradesh (7-1), Telangana (15-1). In the quarterfinal, Rajasthan fell 8-1. In the semifinal, Kerala was blanked 6-0.

**Unbeaten. Focused.**

But the final against hosts Tamil Nadu was a different story. The match ended 5-5 in regulation time. The tension was unbearable. The stadium roared with home support for Tamil Nadu. For Sourya, who had been unexpectedly selected as captain, the responsibility felt heavy.

Before the match, nerves had crept in. He called his coach in Guwahati. A few words of reassurance were enough to steady him. "It was do or die," he recalls. "We did not want to lose like

last year."

In extra time, when Tamil Nadu missed two crucial penalty shots, Assam seized the opportunity.

The final whistle blew with the scoreboard reading 7-5. Assam were champions.

For Sourya, it was not just a win. It was validation — of hard work, belief, and resilience. From last year's runner-up silver in Guwahati to this year's gold in Tamil Nadu, the journey had come full circle.

**Beyond the Borders:** His growth has not been limited to national tournaments. Representing India in the Under-11 Tri-Series in Sri Lanka broadened his horizon. Playing internationally, experiencing better facilities, meeting new players — it shaped his thinking. "It helped me see bigger dreams," he says.

**And dreams he certainly has.**

His ultimate goal is clear: to represent the senior Indian team in the World Cup one day.

**Medals, But More Than Medals:** Statistics tell one part of the story: 19 medals — 9 Gold, 8 Silver, 2 Bronze. Best Goalkeeper twice in Inter-District tournaments. Inter Academy Championship winner. Five felicitation honours by the Assam Roll Ball Association. But numbers do not capture character. At home, his parents have ensured discipline remains constant. Despite success, humility is non-negotiable. "Respect everyone," he has been taught since day one.

Financial challenges exist. Goalkeeping equipment is expensive. Travel costs demand adjustments. His parents cut down on daily expenses to support his dream. They never allowed hardship to become an excuse. When he captained Assam to victory, they felt both nervous and overwhelmed. Pride came later. First came relief.

**More Than a Player:** What makes Sourya's story powerful is not just victory — it is perseverance. It is a young boy choosing practice over playtime, discipline over distraction, and courage over fear.

In an era where many children are drawn to gadgets, his parents initially enrolled him in sports simply to keep him engaged. They did not know they were nurturing a national champion.

Sourya's message to young boys and girls from Meghalaya and beyond is simple: "Dream big and work hard with dedication." There is no dramatic speech. No arrogance. Just sincerity. And perhaps that is what makes him special. From a curious child skating in a Delhi park to a national champion lifting the trophy in Tamil Nadu, Sourya's journey reminds us that greatness is not born overnight. It is built — hour by hour, sacrifice by sacrifice, belief by belief.

This is just the beginning. The future is waiting. But perhaps the most inspiring part of his journey is this — he is still only at the starting line. The medals he has won are milestones, not destinations. The discipline he has learned will shape him far beyond the rink. The courage he has shown at such a young age will carry him through bigger arenas, tougher matches, and greater responsibilities.

One day, when he stands wearing the senior India jersey, representing the nation on the world stage, the story will not begin there. It will still begin in that quiet park in Delhi — where a little boy saw others skate and decided to chase a dream.

**And that dream is only getting stronger.**