

"Great thoughts come from the heart."

— Luc de Clapiers

The Shillong Times

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Meghalaya Tourism: Reality Check
HOW sustainable is the tourism industry in Meghalaya and is tourism the mainstay of families in areas that beckon tourists such as Sohra, Laitlum and Dawki? This question is pertinent considering the recent downturn in tourist footfalls. Meghalaya is notorious for its copycat economy. When someone's enterprise runs well, another person will set up the very same enterprise not too distant from the first one and as a result both enterprises will be vying for the same set of customers and hence the sales drop and affect both enterprises. This is visible across several businesses but more so in the number of homestays/guest houses that have emerged in the last few years. In Sohra every few hundred yards there are homestays/guest houses and most of them wear a forlorn look these days. Lesser known places like Kongthong which once drew travellers because of the unique name tune that women give their children, now seem a wee bit dreary with their guest houses remaining empty even on weekends. The reason could also be that not enough has been imagined for travellers to spend their time meaningfully. But the Tourism Department of the Government has come up with more prized accommodation in Kongthong and adjoining areas in the hope that they will have full occupancy.

Every tourist destination suffers from what is called the 'tourism fatigue syndrome.' Destination loyalty which means tourists revisiting a place is what most tour operators bank on but even the most avid tourist will find that overcrowded destinations lose their charm. For most tourists the silence of a sacred grove gives them the experience they cherish because they come from loud and crowded cities. They just want to lose themselves in the silence. Unfortunately, the large number of visitors to the Mawphlang Sacred Grove has turned it into a noisy space. This is the result of not controlling footfalls—a case of over-tourism and a tourist destination that has exceeded its carrying capacity. This is the case with many destinations in Meghalaya. Mass tourism has all but killed the tourism experience of those looking for peace amidst the waterfalls and verdant hills. The Double Decker Living Root Bridge at Nongriat is now as noisy as a marketplace with tourists thronging there because the promoters don't want to enforce a carrying capacity limit. Greed often takes over reason and this is true of all destinations in Meghalaya today. It's a case of making hay while the sun shines as if the sun might suddenly set.

Also, in terms of resource sharing, how is the community benefitting from the presence of guest houses and homestays? What is the community getting in return for the intrusion and loss of privacy? Local communities are expected to be welcoming towards every tourist but that is a mutual thing. Tourists too must earn respect from their behaviour. Most tourists act like they own the place and show no respect for local sensibilities. Tourism in Meghalaya has been sold much before locals were ready for it and the fatigue is showing.

Crisis in the Middle East: Indigenous Solidarity vs. Imperial Hypocrisy

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Despite Israel's utmost attempt to draw the United States (US) into a protracted conflict with Iran, a ceasefire has been declared for now. This is not the first time the Israeli government led by Benjamin Netanyahu has attempted to destabilise the Middle East, with the most recent example being the disastrous Iraq invasion. It was Netanyahu who lied about Iraq developing WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction) with the then US administration supporting the claim to invade the country. This time again, as US and Iran were about to meet to talk about a new nuclear deal between the two countries, Israeli carried illegal strikes on Iran and assassinated many important members of the government. They claimed this prevented Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, despite lacking evidence.

Tulsi Gabbard, United States Director of National Intelligence, had testified before the Congress in March that Iran was not building nuclear weapons. Later, after being publicly chided by Donald Trump, she retracted and claimed that Iran could produce nuclear weapons "within weeks". This flip-flop was meant to get into the good books of a president who values personal loyalty above all else. But what about the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency), an UN-mandated agency, whose report Israel used to justify the attack on Iran? In an interview with an international news agency, the Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi said, "we did not find in Iran any elements to indicate that there is an active, systematic plan to build a nuclear weapon". The report also mentioned this, and when asked why the report was used to justify the attack, the Director General said Israel should answer that question. It is to be noted that in October 2003, Ali Hosseini Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran, had issued an oral fatwa that forbade the production and use of any form of weapon of mass destruction. So, the claim that Iran was trying to make nuclear weapons was a lie fabricated by Israel. Then there was an attempt to spin another narrative.

Soon after the attacks, Israel starting asserting that there is a need for a regime

change in Iran to bring democracy and freedom. Netanyahu especially stressed on the human rights violations and suppression of women in the country. One social media user astutely quipped that whenever a western nation talks about bringing freedom to women, it means that they are actually going to bomb them. Netanyahu speaking about women's empowerment is particularly ironic, given that the International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued an arrest warrant for him for the war crime of using starvation as a method of warfare, as well as for crimes against humanity—including murder, persecution, and other inhumane acts committed during the Gaza war. At this moment, over 55,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces, including 28,000 women and girls and 17,000 children. The only reason that Netanyahu is not behind bars is because he is supported by western countries like US whose own track record in killing innocent people is horrendous.

Since the Second World War, the US has bombed 25 countries — and over half of them are non-Muslim, proving that the pretext of fighting terrorism (used for attacking Muslim countries) was always a lie. This list omits the coups the US instigated in many countries, removing heads of state to install regimes more favourable to their interests. Latin America is a good example of this. In order to protect the interests of its multinational corporations, such as the United Fruit Company, the CIA instigated a coup against the democratically elected government of Guatemala in 1954. Between 1960 and 1996, the US-supported military regimes were responsible for the killing of 1.5 lakh Indigenous Maya people and the rape of another 1 lakh Maya women. This is known as the Maya Genocide or the Silent Holocaust. US interventions also gave rise to the 'banana republics'—Latin America countries characterised by poverty, corruption and mismanagement.

The current Ukraine crisis also has its origins in the 2014 coup which led to the ouster of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich. The coup was openly sup-

ported by the US and its European allies. US efforts to bring Ukraine into NATO ultimately contributed to Russia's invasion and the ongoing conflict. During the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the US did not want Soviet missiles near its borders. Similarly, Russia does not want US-led NATO missiles near its own.

Iran has also suffered from regime change operations sponsored by the US and Western nations. In 1953, the US and the United Kingdom sponsored a coup that led to the overthrow of Iran's elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, because he refused to submit to Western interests. He had attempted to nationalize the oil industry so that Iran's resources would benefit its own people. If the Khasis today had their own Ri Hyniewtrep and it were located near the US, there would likely have already been a coup and the installation of a dictator to help the US gain access to mineral resources, especially uranium. So, countries that the US bombed and destabilised have nothing to do with bringing freedom to the people from oppressive regimes but pure corporate and geopolitical interests. But, of course, this costs a lot of money.

The last conflict that the US directly intervened in was the Iraq War and that cost 2 trillion dollars and loss of thousands of American lives. To put things into perspective, India's total GDP is currently 3.9 trillion dollars. That led to the rise of ISIS and further devastation in the Middle East, which suited the Israeli government who wanted to repeat the tactic with Iran. But going down that path meant the US would again have to spend trillions of dollars and lose thousands of their troops in the ensuing conflict. Israel was already being hammered by Iran's ballistic missiles striking Tel Aviv and other locations. Without US support, its defenses would have collapsed long ago. So, they sought to force US intervention by shifting the narrative from destroying nuclear facilities to 'saving the women of Iran'. From its own experience, the US knew such slogans are a sham. With the country already facing

enormous debt and Donald Trump promising to end foreign interventions to focus on 'America First', the US was reluctant to get involved. So, they dropped bombs on Iran's nuclear facilities—which, according to their own preliminary assessment, caused minimal damage—declared victory, and announced a ceasefire. Israel had to agree because it knows that it cannot survive without US support. Iran agreed because it had also suffered and needed to reorganise. To begin with, Iran has shut down all GPS services within its territory and officially activated the Chinese Beidou Navigation Satellite System. So, how is all of this connected to Meghalaya?

From my discussions with a few people (and I am sure there are many more), I see that there's a lot of support for Israel's actions in Gaza, actions termed genocide by the UN Special Committee with Israel's former Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, also admitting his country is committing war crimes. They also support the attack on Iran, parroting the western propaganda of human rights abuse. I am not saying that there is no human rights abuse, but I am concerned about the double standards. As an indigenous person, I support Palestinian resistance against the occupation of their indigenous territories by immigrants from Europe and America in the same way I believe no group—Indigenous or non-Indigenous—can claim ownership of our homeland or anything in it based solely on their own religious beliefs. At the same time, I condemn the October 7 attack by Hamas, which resulted in the massacre of Israelis. Political struggle must never target unarmed civilians. Israel has been targeting civilians since it came into being. However, asking supporters of the U.S. and Israel to condemn the Palestinian genocide and call for Netanyahu's arrest for war crimes will make them squirm and they will vehemently try to defend the Israeli government's actions. I'm genuinely confused by such people, and perhaps readers can respond to my article with their opinions. I truly want to understand—why this hypocrisy?

(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)

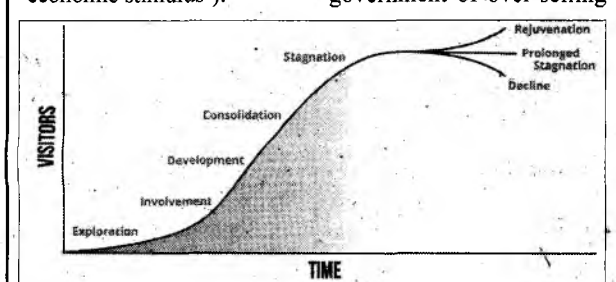
The Rs. 133 crore claim: Fallacies, misconception, and crossroads

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

Finally, the Government of Meghalaya has placed on record the economic outcomes of tourism festivals. The government has claimed that Rs. 133.42 crore has been generated over a series of festivals and events, many of which it had promoted aggressively. If the amount Rs. 133 crore is viewed in isolation then it looks impressive. However, as usual in money matters, the devil lies in the details. When the amount is viewed holistically, one wonders if the Rs. 23.5 crore (which the state government had invested in promotions) could have been used in better interventions within the tourism sector itself. The Rs. 133 crore projected proudly by the state government is a fallacy and misconception, and most disturbingly it has put Meghalaya tourism at the crossroads prematurely.

Fallacies

The core principle of an economic stimulus is — 'to target the most needy sections of society who also form the majority (in numbers) so as to achieve maximum impact (outcomes).' In terms of livelihoods dependency and two square meals a day, the tourism stakeholders are definitely not the majority in Meghalaya. This recognition goes to the poor and ignored farmers and all those who engaged in various agricultural activities. Now, even if the majority is to be viewed from the perspective of tourism alone, then they are the rural hamlets, the clusters of villages, the average Meghalayan youth who tries to spearhead community-based tourism so that it benefits the populace of his village(s)—but whose dreams die a quick death due to a lack of state intervention (or in the words of the state government 'economic stimulus').



The state GDP of Meghalaya is around Rs. 43,000 crores for 2022-23. The share of tourism is around 7% and this amounts to Rs. 3,000 crores. Now, Rs. 133 crores when compared to Rs. 3,000 crores is only 4.5% which is meager in comparison to the whole sector. This is an indication that the focus of the government needs a revisit. According to the state government, every Re. 1 spent on tickets generated an addition Rs. 334 in other tourism activities. This algorithm needs further clarification for it is preposterous and illogical. For instance, even if a ticket cost of Rs. 1000 is considered; then according to the algorithm of the government it would generate Re. 3,34,000. Map this amount with the tourism services currently available in Meghalaya and the amount makes no sense at all. It is nothing but misdirection.

The biggest question that arises is whether the Rs. 133 crores is revenue or a profit. If it is revenue then it is less significant. However, it is obvious the state government would harp on it. If it is a profit, then if the standard margin for Meghalaya tourism of 50% (arrived at on the basis of studies conducted on Sohra Region) is considered then the direct impact is Rs. 66.5 crores. This is the final and credible figure which has to be analyzed and discussed. Now, compare Rs. 23.5 crores to Rs. 66.5 crores and make an informed conclusion. So, what is the real issue here which is more important than Rs 133 crores — to date, Meghalaya tourism does not have a system to record tourism receipts, taxes, expenditures, etc across its various activities such as food and beverages, accommodation, transportation, leisure activities, adventure activities, events, tourism festivals, etc. If a system were there, then the figure reported by the state government would have been more factual (and in most likelihood a lot lesser than Rs. 133 crores).

Misconception

Tourism festivals are exclusive. They predominantly benefit those who are well

established and positioned. For instance, accommodations which are centrally located with better networking, those who are able to set up shop inside or around the venue, etc. There has to be a proper cost-benefit analysis on this aspect. Further, Meghalaya tourism is facing serious challenges on over-tourism and carrying capacity. The nature-based attractions are now purely mass tourism destinations and have turned into an eye-sore. The majority of the itineraries are made outside the state and here then comes the issue of revenue and profit leakages. Meghalaya does not get the full share of the returns from tourism as it deserves. It is like 5 people are sitting in a taxi and only 2 are paying for the service. The remaining 3 consume the tourism offerings without benefit to the state. These are the type of loopholes that need to be addressed if sustainability is to be achieved. Hence, the current approach of using festivals to attract more tourists is wrong. The proper way would be to re-vamp the tourism services and infrastructure in an organized manner and then have select high-end festivals to get maximum benefits from the tourist. An example - it is never a good idea to invite people into our home if the sitting room is in a mess!

Crossroads

Meghalaya tourism is standing at the crossroads of nature-based ecotourism and festival-based events mass tourism. If the decision is to be made on the basis of the strengths and opportunities available to Meghalaya tourism (which is nature-based, environment, wellness, etc) then there would be no crossroads at all. However, the strategy of the MDA 2.0 government of over-selling

festival tourism has put the stakeholders in a difficult spot. Going by the Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) Model of Richard Butler (please refer to the figure), Meghalaya is currently in the stage of development. The development gradually scales towards stagnation over a period of 7-10 years. The key requirement here is that the tourism development strategies and interventions are to be formulated and implemented in accordance with the strengths of the place and the abilities of the host communities. If this fundamental requirement is violated then tourism progress would not happen as per its normal sequencing but rather result in a sudden tailspin of decline (straight from development to decline). Sure, the state government can say that it will try to rejuvenate and reverse the decline, but, the golden rule in tourism is that if things happen too suddenly then there would be no reaction time. By the way, accommodation bookings for July, 2025 in Sohra region are dismal. Food for thought!

In the end, the Rs. 133 crores says that tourism festivals have a peripheral role to play in Meghalaya tourism. This situation corroborates and is in line with other destinations like Meghalaya which are nature-based. Now, the state government has to decide which form of tourism it wants to promote. Common-sense dictates that Meghalaya chooses a path which is as per its strengths and opportunities for scaling by involving the grassroots through community cohesiveness and training. In the analogy of a car, tourism festivals are accessories. There is a danger now of accessories being given more importance than the heart and soul of what Meghalaya tourism truly is. It is logical to take tourism festivals for what they are with no need to over-sell or over-emphasize. Every activity in the tourism sector has its own place as per the nature of the destination. Overplaying one aspect would ruin everything!

(The writer teaches at NEHU. Email - blyngdoh@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

Khyndai Lad Melee

Editor,

Khyndai Lad is the busiest commercial center of Shillong. On 30 June 2025, since morning, citizens passing through the area have witnessed a melee, or scuffle, that erupted due to the forceful eviction of street vendors. Many of them are licensed street vendors and hawkers and also there are hundreds of them whose licenses are being processed after the completion of the in situ survey. As invitee member of the Meghalaya & Greater Shillong and Progressive Hawkers and Street Vendors Association (MGSPHSA), I was present during the first half of the morning and witnessed the incident firsthand, standing in solidarity with the street vendors whose relentless struggle for the protection and regulation of their livelihoods has been ongoing for more than a decade. Their efforts are now under threat due to insensitivity on the part of the State.

In fact there are plenty of human stories to share but for want of space and time I shall save those for a later date. However, let me take this opportunity to present certain facts so as to put the real issues into proper perspective.

The process of implementing the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and

Regulation) Act 2014, has been progressing smoothly with the cooperation of the hawkers' association and various stakeholders, despite some hiccups along the way. The opposition expressed by the street vendors and hawkers on June 30, 2025, is not against the implementation of the law per se; rather, it is a protest against recent irregularities that have arisen. These include the issuance of Certificates of Vending (CoV) to individuals who are not genuine hawkers, an issue the organization had objected to during the claims and objections process.

Furthermore, the unilateral decision to relocate vendors to new vending areas without the approval of the Provisional Town Vending Committee (PTVC) is completely illegal. The discrepancies and flaws in the issued CoVs clearly demonstrate the ineptitude and possibly deliberate attempts by the State to create confusion, thereby denying the poor hawkers and street vendors their right to work and livelihood.

Members of the PTVC, representing the MGSPHSA have sent several letters strongly petitioning the government to rectify these flaws from the outset. As the process has just started, it is mutually agreed amongst the stakeholders that Khyndai Lad area will be a pilot for the implementation of the Street Vending Law. From day one the MGSPHSA

has earnestly and religiously devoted its time in participating and monitoring the processes of implementation. The Association strongly felt that laying the fair and just foundation in the process of verifying and issuing of CoVs to genuine street vendors and hawkers is a matter of grave importance and thereby rectification of flaws/discrepancies is crucial to prevent future irregularities, unfair practices, and corruption.

In this context, the resistance by the street vendors and hawkers is valid. The State must address and rectify all the issues raised in these correspondences before resuming the processes of relocation, re-spacing etc., as agreed upon by stakeholders who are members of the PTVC.

I remain optimistic that with the cooperation of the street vendors and hawkers association, the community and the State, these issues can be resolved amicably and justly.

Yours etc.,
Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh
Via email

Include Theatre in the Film Tourism Policy

Editor,
I appreciate the State Government's invitation for

public feedback "to ensure broad-based participation in shaping the Meghalaya Film Tourism Policy 2025" so as to tap the abundant talent available in our state not only in the field of music but also in "strengthening the Local Film Ecosystem and nurturing talent and positioning Meghalaya as a Central Hub for Film Production in the North East" by offering financial and other incentives.

However, it is regrettable that so far, the talent to act and perform through theatre has not been given the priority it deserves. As someone who has been involved with theatre for the past many years, I would like to share that there is a lot of talent in performing arts through drama among school students but which gets wasted once they have passed out from their respective schools because of the absence of institutions to cultivate and enhance these talents. One of the main reasons is the lack of government support.

Theatre is a non-commercial activity, at least for now, in our state, and it is quite expensive to stage, but it is also a stepping-stone to commercial ventures like movies/film production and commercial advertisements in the State as well as in the national and International level.

The FOREVER YOUNG together with the MAITSHAPHRANG had been staging several Street and

Stage plays in the past both in Khasi and English. We had also performed two plays on Doordarshan Kendra, Shillong and a literacy promotion play for NEHU. The ones posted on Youtube are "Papa Shano Phi Don" and "Burom la Uba lap" both musicals and in Khasi and our latest English musical play "Juliet and Romeo." Unfortunately, due to inadequate financial assistance from the Government we are not able to stage our plays up to the standards required.

I therefore request the government to include the promotion of theatre as part of this policy, giving the same financial incentives and support and I assure of our commitment to work together in providing a strong platform to take theatre to the next level of professionalism as in the case of Assam, Manipur and other states in India.

Yours etc.,

Michael N. Syiem,
Via email

MeECL using unfair tactics to exploit poor consumers

Editor,

What Salil Gwali has cited through his letter under the caption "High-Voltage Bills Shocked MeECL Consumers," (ST June 17, 2025) is a very serious concern now

among the consumers who have been receiving inflated electricity bills.

When one evaluates the existing billing system and also compares it with that of about nine months ago, there is a big difference. I am surprised that after charging for 75 units electricity consumption as per the fixed rate, MeECL has again charged ₹185 as excess demand charges and Rs 756 as excess energy charges, as per the bill of the recent month June 2025. Suddenly, why has MeECL adopted this method to loot the consumers, which we never saw a year ago? I used to get a bill amount under Rs. 500, but now it has shot up to 1,500 which is three times more.

This has adversely affected the poor who are struggling hard to meet their monthly family expenses. MeECL must stop this looting tactic immediately. The government should take note of the fact that post-COVID-19, lakhs of families are struggling hard to make ends meet as they have lost employment.

Gewali has correctly said that "the state cannot shine when its people are left in the dark and looted, both literally and figuratively."

Yours etc.,
Mary Wankhar,
Via Email

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"Words are but pictures of our thoughts."

— John Dryden

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Monumental blunder

IT'S a sign of the times that vital information concerning India's defence comes from foreign soil in bits and pieces. In an epic demonstration of drift that marks these times, the 'ceasefire' between India and Pakistan was first announced in May by American President Donald Trump from the comfort of the White House. India's defence chief later went to Singapore and spoke about our loss of aircraft in the war, but left the big question unanswered: how many fighter jets were lost. Now, a defence attaché states a bit more in Jakarta, Indonesia, about the reason why India lost "some" aircraft. While India is "hiding" facts, the global media is awash with Pakistani claims about the "big hits" it did on India. Pakistan obviously won the information war. But every penny the nation lost is answerable as it was taken from the tax the people paid through their noses to the exchequer. The government in a hide-and-seek mode is not yet ready to face the opposition's questions in Parliament. Despite a vague denial from Delhi, questions would also be raised in Parliament as to how Donald Trump got objectionably involved in the Kashmir-linked offensive.

The defence attaché — an authoritative source — tells a foreign audience that the loss of fighter jets to Pakistan force was due to "constraints" placed on the Indian forces by the government in New Delhi; not due to the fault of the military brass. From what he stated, it is clear that the mess-up was caused by a decision and the subsequent transmission of a message to Pakistan by the Indian government that India would fire only at the terrorist infrastructure inside Pakistan and not strike at the military. The misplaced, perhaps foolish, "expectation" was that the Pakistani military would stand aside and simply watch the action. The reverse obviously happened on May 7, when the Indian offensive started. This instruction obviously tied the hands of the Indian military at the critical first hour. The Pakistani military establishment, with much glee, responded in full force and with unexpected vehemence. The unwarranted advance warning helped the Pakistani military to safely eject terror masterminds to safer locations in a jiffy. Hence, India could not get at them; and instead we got Masood Azhar's sister and her family; not Azhar himself. India's strategy misfired. There was a monumental blunder.

Consider, rather, the manner in which Israel decimated Iran's military commander and others by precision strikes. India's stated position is that the terrorists are part of the Pakistani military establishment. This was confirmed by video clips of army officers carrying the hearses of the killed terrorists and organising their funeral there. They are one and the same. This being so, what sense does a message of this kind make? We are yet to get many matters straightened out. Like, also, how we lost the "six" fighter jets if the air forces of Pakistan and India did not cross the border. Facts are sacred and must come out.

Letters to the Editor

Hawkers in distress!

Editor,
It was distressing to see visuals of the police attempting to evict hawkers in such an aggressive manner. The issue of hawkers versus the state has persisted for over a decade, originating when the then state government unlawfully introduced its own law, in contravention of the central law that had already been enacted. This led to a court case in which the hawkers emerged victorious. However, it now appears that the Government is once again attempting to act outside the bounds of the law.

According to the law, the number of hawkers permitted in a particular location must be based on the holding capacity of the area. As per Section 2(b) of the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, holding capacity refers to "the maximum number of street vendors who can be accommodated in any vending zone and has been determined as such by the local authority on the recommendations of the Town Vending Committee." Furthermore, Chapter III, Section 3(2) of the Act stipulates that this figure is to be "two and a half per cent of the population of the ward or zone or town or city, as the

case may be, in accordance with the plan for street vending and the holding capacity of the vending zones."

The law also lays down specific provisions for the relocation of vendors. Section (2b), under the principles of relocation, clearly states that affected vendors shall be relocated in a manner that improves their livelihoods and standards of living—or at the very least restores them, in real terms, to pre-eviction levels. This means that any new location must not result in a decline in the vendors' income.

Has the Government of Meghalaya conducted a holding capacity assessment? Has it undertaken a survey to ensure that relocated hawkers will not suffer a loss of income compared to their previous locations? These are not discretionary measures—they are legal obligations, which the Government explicitly committed to upholding in court. If these steps have not been taken, is the Government now reneging on its promise to the judiciary? Proceeding with forced evictions without complying with these requirements is a clear violation of the law. A government that ignores its legal responsibilities and acts arbitrarily forfeits its moral and constitutional legitimacy to govern.

Yours etc.,
Bhogtoram Mawroh,
Via email

Resurrect the Khasi Script: Reclaim a culture!

By KN Kumar

Let me start with a caveat: this is an 'outsider-insider' perspective. Having worked in the state for quite some time, I care deeply about a few things enough to speak out, while being aware that, no matter how strongly I feel, it's still not the same as a 'native' perspective. But expression shapes who we are, so I want to share something I noticed early on after joining the state, and have continued to question. Khasis celebrate their traditions, lively festivals, and rich oral storytelling. Yet, a key part of their identity — their script — has no place in their nearly 4,000-year history. Today, more than 1.6 million people across India, Bangladesh, and beyond speak Khasi, but it's written in the Latin script introduced by missionaries in 1841. While this script is functional, I believe that it doesn't carry the cultural weight of the Khasi heritage. My premise is that a concerted effort should be made to revive the Khasi script to deepen the Khasi identity for future generations.

A bit of background: Before British colonization, Khasi royals used Bangla for official work, as shown in early Bible translations by William Carey from 1813 to 1838. However, the Bangla script couldn't capture all the unique sounds of Khasi, making it hard to use widely. Then Thomas Jones arrived in 1841 with the Latin script, based on the Sohra dialect, which became the standard. In 2017, hope flickered when an unknown script, thought to be Khasi, was discovered at the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti Library in Guwahati. Clues of Khasi words like ka thoh (to write) and ki dak (script) support the idea of a writing system existing before colonization. So, my question is: Can the lost Khasi script be rediscovered? If not, can we create a new one that forcefully presents Khasi identity? Here are my arguments in favour:

(1) Language and script share a relationship that extends far beyond mere transcription of sounds into symbols. A script isn't just a tool; it reflects who we are. A native script serves as the visual embodiment of the soul, reflecting its unique phonetic patterns, tonal variations, and cultural nuances. When languages rely on foreign scripts, they inevitably face limitations that compromise their authentic expression. Reviving a script means reclaiming a significant part of the culture. A written script

would keep the heritage alive and help young Khasis connect with their roots, thus building pride and resilience. It could spark new art, literature, and music, reinforcing the cultural strength of a community. A revived script can help resist cultural blending, something that happens so subtly that even a trained eye can miss it.

(2) Khasi possesses sounds and tonal patterns that have no direct equivalents in Latin-based writing systems. This phonetic compromise not only affects pronunciation accuracy among learners but also gradually erodes the language's authentic sound patterns across generations. The Korean Hangul script, developed in the 15th century specifically for the Korean language, demonstrates how a purpose-built writing system can strengthen linguistic identity. Before Hangul, Koreans struggled with Chinese characters that poorly suited their language structure. The introduction of a native script revolutionized Korean

language became obsolete once it adapted to Greek and later Arabic influences, altering its sound system. Today it is dead. It is beyond debate that Khasi's complex consonant clusters, which are central to the language's morphological structure, cannot be accurately represented using standard Latin letters.

(4) Khasi is part of the Mon-Khmer group of the Austroasiatic languages, one of the oldest language families in Southeast Asia, extending from eastern India to Vietnam and Cambodia. Its presence in Northeast India has intrigued language experts. One theory suggests Khasi speakers came from Southeast Asia, possibly Cambodia, around 4,000 years ago, broadly supported by linguistic similarities and genetic evidence, while another proposes that Austroasiatic languages originated in northeastern India. My view? It doesn't matter: it is sufficient to note that Khasi shares words with Khmer, like khla (tiger) and snem

centuries stand preserved.

(5) The development of a native Khasi script would create new economic opportunities within the community. Font designers, calligraphers, publishers, and digital content creators would find new markets for their skills. Educational materials, literature, and digital applications could be produced more effectively, supporting local economic development while strengthening linguistic infrastructure. Most importantly, it will have a significant impact on educating the children in a script that is the best fit for their mother tongue.

Creating a native Khasi script requires collaboration among linguists, cultural leaders, educators, and community members. The process must balance linguistic accuracy with practical usability, ensuring that the new script serves both scholarly precision and widespread accessibility. Linguists and scholars could leverage modern technology, like AI and character recognition, to develop the script. Other Austroasiatic scripts, such as Khmer, might reveal similarities based on linguistic ties. Archaeological excavations in important sites such as Nartiang or Sohra could uncover artefacts or writings from the past. The global Khasi diaspora could contribute as well. With over 1.6 million speakers and related language groups, a united effort might lead to breakthroughs. The Khasi community has the intellectual resources, cultural wisdom, and organizations needed to undertake this transformative project. What we need is the collective will to prioritize linguistic sovereignty and cultural authenticity. A native script would symbolize cultural and intellectual independence and collective identity. For anyone who asks me if such a massive effort is worth it? My answer: "There's no price too high for preserving an identity." Script is a part of identity. It is my strong belief that not everything in life should be viewed through the lens of practicality. I say this as a citizen of a country with 1600 languages, more than 350 of which are oral. Society must stand for more than just material wealth. If this movement can't start in Meghalaya, then there's no place where it can start. So, who is listening?

(The writer is a former member of the IAS, Email upindia@gmail.com)

"A script isn't just a tool; it reflects who we are. A native script serves as the visual embodiment of the soul, reflecting its unique phonetic patterns, tonal variations, and cultural nuances. When languages rely on foreign scripts, they inevitably face limitations that compromise their authentic expression."

literature, education, and cultural expression. Similarly, the development of the Cherokee script by Sequoyah in the early 19th century transformed their society. Sequoyah (1770–1843), also known as George Gist, was a Cherokee blacksmith who created a writing system. Sequoyah's creation is one of the few known instances of an individual independently inventing a writing system for an oral language. Within decades, the Cherokee Nation achieved near-universal literacy, published a newspaper, and created rich written literature. And their population? Just 4.6 lakhs.

(3) Languages that rely on foreign scripts often experience a gradual loss of their unique features. Prolonged use of unsuitable writing systems can cause phonetic drift, where the spoken language slowly shifts to fit the limitations of the adopted script instead of preserving its original patterns. The Coptic (ancient Egyptian)

(year); Mei for mother in Khasi is Mae in Khmer. Similarly, ding (fire) in Khasi is ting in Khmer, and doh (fish) is tuk doh (water fish) in Khmer. A leaf in Khasi is sla, and in Khmer, it's slæk. A child is khun in Khasi and kon in Khmer. The name of the great river "Mekong" is rooted in Mae Nam Khong, where "Mae" means "mother," "Nam" means "water," and "Khong" means "river."

The linguistic proximity between Khasi and Khmer languages offers particularly relevant insights for script development. Khmer faced similar challenges in preserving its linguistic authenticity when early European missionaries attempted to romanize it using Latin characters. Cambodians resisted strongly under the leadership of a monk, Chuoun Nath, who championed "Khmerization," and succeeded in purging foreign influences. Now, the Khmer classical literature, religious texts, and linguistic precision across

almost always overlooked. And yet, they are the critical link between pharmaceutical advancements and the practitioners who prescribe them. They are the ones who ensure that doctors remain updated with the latest medical breakthroughs, new formulations, and treatment options. But their journey is far from easy.

A medical representative's day begins early and stretches late into the evening. It involves hopping between hospitals, clinics, and pharmacies, navigating long travel hours, erratic schedules, and unforgiving weather conditions. And what do they wait for? A few minutes with a doctor and sometimes even less. Those few moments are all they have to introduce a new product, explain its benefits, and hope their words are retained amid a sea of daily clinical pressures.

They wait patiently — sometimes outside clinics for hours — often standing, often ignored. Many face closed doors, long queues, and, at times, unkind behaviour. Despite that, they return the next day, just as prepared, just as hopeful, and just as committed.

Beyond the visible grind lies an invisible weight — performance targets, sales pressure, and job insecurity. Their work is not just physically demanding, but mentally taxing too. And yet, they walk into every chamber with professional-

ism, courtesy, and quiet determination.

It's easy to forget that these are individuals with families, responsibilities, dreams, and dignity. What they do is not "just a sales job." It's a profession built on science, communication, and perseverance. They are not just promoting brands but they are advocating for better healthcare.

So, how can we help? It doesn't take much. A little respect, a few minutes of undivided attention, a kind word, a chair to sit on, or a glass of water while they wait and these small gestures can mean the world to someone who has spent their entire day running from one appointment to the next.

To every medical representative reading this: your efforts matter. You are seen. You are appreciated. Your persistence, resilience, and dedication form a quiet pillar of the healthcare system that more people need to recognize.

It's time we give medical representatives the dignity they deserve and not just in policy or profession, but in our everyday human interactions.

Yours etc.,
Debarun Bhattacharjee,
Kolkata

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

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Slap or Shake... Israel says it's made a significant dent.

The US says it's made its point.

Iran, not to be left out, declares a glorious victory.

It's the kind of global group project where everyone insists they did all the work and everyone else copied their notes. A kind of international show-and-slap, where grown men in expensive suits and national flags on their lapels, behave like toddlers fighting over a toy in the sandbox — except this toy has missiles, and the sandbox is a war-torn city with no Wi-Fi and no water.

Yes, slap.

Not punch. Not kick. Not karate chop.

Just slap.

That glorious, noisy, open-palmed gesture that carries the drama of Bollywood and the sting of a mosquito bite. Enough to grab attention, not enough to demand surgery. The international equivalent of saying, "Don't mess with me... but let's not get into something that affects my GDP."

"We made our point," says one side.

"We retaliated," says the other.

"We retaliated to the re-

after enough people are dead to justify them.

It's practically a Netflix series by now. Except in this one, the plot is recycled, the actors are overpaid, and the audience never gets a break.

And I ask, humbly — and somewhat sarcastically — when did shaking hands become so... unfashionable?

When did dialogue become boring?

When did diplomacy become the poor cousin of drama?

Maybe it's because shaking hands doesn't go viral.

You can't frame a handshake with a patriotic soundtrack.

You can't show a handshake on national news and expect people to chant slogans.

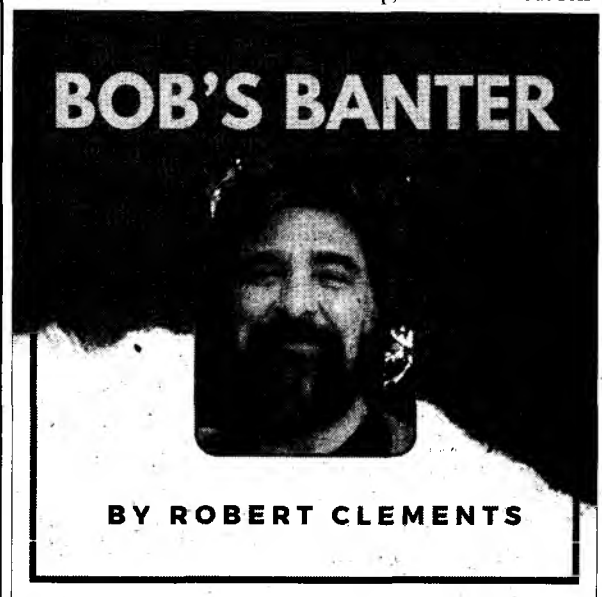
But you can save lives with one.

Imagine — just imagine — a world where the hand doesn't rise to strike, but to connect.

Where leaders don't ask, "How hard did we hit them?" but instead, "How far did we reach across the table?"

Where strength is measured not in decibels, but in dialogue.

"Wait, Bob," someone interrupts me at my imaginary teashop, "but what about self-



respect and deterrence and national honour?"

Yes, yes. Very important.

But what about the children who now wake up screaming?

What about the teenagers who've never seen peacetime? What about the farmers who no longer have land to sow, or water to drink, or livestock to feed? Because slaps may be symbolic at the top — but down below, their echoes are catastrophic.

And no, I'm not saying don't defend your country.

I'm just saying, don't do it in such a way that the only thing left of your country is rubble, grief, and revenge waiting to grow up into tomorrow's terror.

Let's face it: no one really wins a slap-fest.

There are just better publicists.

Better narratives.

Better hashtags.

And meanwhile, the people who were never asked for their opinion — the ones who just wanted to live, study, raise kids, pay bills and complain about taxes — are the ones who end up buried, burned, or broken.

So here's my humble plea, addressed to every leader out there:

Dear Sirs (and occasional Madams),

Next time your hand rises — in anger, pride, or retaliation — pause.

Pause, and ask yourself: Is this hand rising to slap... or to shake?

To deepen wounds... or to start healing?

To draw blood... or to offer peace?

And if it's the latter — thank you.

Because that one shake might just give us all what we desperately need:

A full night's sleep without air raid sirens.

A conversation that doesn't start with explosions.

A tomorrow not built on today's ashes.

As for me, I'll go back to my cup of cutting chai, and pray that for once, someone somewhere chooses not to slap back, but to reach out.

Because, sometimes, the loudest act of courage is not a slap — but a simple handshake.

If you would like to receive Bob's Banter as a daily column in your WhatsApp everyday, do send your name and phone number to bobsbanter@gmail.com

Step 1: Slap.

Step 2: Deny intent.

Step 3: Express regret for "any unintended consequences."

Step 4: Wait for the other guy to slap back.

Step 5: Escalate.

Step 6: Ask for peace talks

"The very essence of instinct is that it's followed independently of reason."

— Charles Darwin

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SHILLONG, THURSDAY, JULY 3, 2025

Hawkers Vrs Government standoff

SHILLONG is a hawkers' paradise and so is every urban Indian city. Hawkers make up an integral part of urban landscapes and people throng their stalls because of the affordable products they have on sale which are often much lesser priced than those inside stores. The reason for the price difference is because the store owner has to pay rent while hawkers pay very little or nothing if they have set up shop without any license from any authority which is the case in Shillong city where hawkers emerge according to season. During the orange season there are hawkers sitting with just two baskets of oranges; in the strawberry season there are seasonal hawkers. There are of course hawkers selling products all year round and those hopefully are licensed by the appropriate authorities. One prime reason for the emergence of hawkers who are in a do or die situation is poverty. Many of them are women. But that does not give them the right to obstruct pedestrian movement and to set up shops on roads and footpaths. The right to livelihoods cannot infringe on the right of other citizens who may be equally poor to walk safely and not be run over by speeding vehicles in a city where roads are already very narrow.

The irony however is that hawkers are located in high-traffic areas, making it easy for workers, shoppers, and travellers to pick up stuff like vegetable and fruits on their way home without having to waste time and effort going to the main marketplaces. The battle between the Government of Meghalaya and the hawkers' union is a protracted one having gone on for several years. It now resembles a war of attrition depending on who blinks first. The hawkers' union have the force of law on their side. The central law mandates that if they are evicted from a particular location the alternative location should yield better incomes than the previous one. For a city that is breaking at the seams finding such an alternative vending space is a challenge. Hence the gridlock even while the Government uses strong-arm tactics to remove the legitimate vendors to a different location within city limits not far from the present location and vendors refusing to budge.

The law provides that vendors can only make up 2.5 % of the population of the ward/town/city as the case may be taking into account the holding capacity of the respective locations. In this case the hawkers in Police Bazar can only constitute only 2.5% of the population of that area. Questions being asked by those in support of the hawkers is whether the Government has done due diligence in listing out the number of licensed hawkers and whether those make up 2.5% of the total population of Police Bazar ward/area/locality. At the root of the matter is a clash of ideology between those wanting roads that allow unhindered movement for all, including the disabled, and those who believe that hawkers legitimately occupy public roads and footpaths because the Government has failed to provide a commercially viable vending zone.

Feedback on proposed Meghalaya Education Grant Proposals

By Toki Blah

At the risk of sounding like a stuck record disc, I once again return to the topic of Education in Meghalaya! Why? Reason is because I sincerely believe that it is crucial for our survival as a state and as a community. The urge to write on the subject is further spurred on by the fact that the PGI (Performance Grading Index) shows Meghalaya at the bottom of the list, the worst performing state. Now despite this; despite the importance of the subject, except for the few "usual suspects", none seem duly concerned about this dismal state of affairs. No one seems bothered about the future of our children. Out of the 60 MLAs of the state only the CM and the Education Minister have referred to it. 58 other MLAs and the political parties they belong to, either have nothing to comment or they consider it below their dignity or level of understanding to do so. The so-called Pressure Groups (Sengbhalang, consisting of student bodies) prefer to keep mum over the issue. The Church, which sponsors most of the elementary and secondary schools in the rural areas, believes it has nothing to say. So what is the take home point from all this silence?

It simply enforces a very discordant suspicion. That the entire political setup; the Pressure Groups (self-proclaimed saviors of the community) and the Church itself (that incidentally is the sponsor of most of the mission schools), we seem to depend on prefers an illiterate uneducated base to survive on! "So let's maintain the Status Quo", appears to be the catchword for these entities! As such none are interested in applying their minds on how to improve education in Meghalaya. A sad conclusion but one we are forced to arrive at!

Let us therefore focus on the Education Department and see what they have to say on the matter. The Education Department it appears has developed a comprehensive strategy to improve its PGI score and is diligently implementing it or that is what they claim. On this score the Education Department has emerged with a paper titled "Discussion Paper on Consolidation of Multiple Grant in Aid Schemes for Educational Institutions in Meghalaya," on which public comments are invited. In a nutshell the paper explores the need to consolidate the multiple Grant-in-Aid (GIA) schemes currently supporting educational institutions in Meghalaya.

The proposal forms an integral part of the above-mentioned comprehensive

strategy. Why so? Well, according to statistics the reasons for the above proposals appear to be many and evidently genuine. First and foremost is the political and social neglect and inattention paid to Education for the last 50 years of statehood. This has resulted in ad-hoc and unplanned implementation of schemes within the sector that has in turn produced more schools than are really necessary. 14,582 in all and of these 240 have zero while 2,269 others have single digit enrolment. The above employ a record no of 55,160 teachers, some trained others not but employed under different categories of schemes and enjoying different pay grades. Add to this is the near total absence of supervision over how these institutions are run and managed. A right proper mess up! This is the nightmare and horror story for those in search of learning in Meghalaya, especially those in our rural areas. The time to wake up is long overdue and the Education Department's call for public comments on how to revitalize Meghalaya Education could not be more timely. So let's try and respond.

The main focus of the above proposals is to streamline the complex and mind boggling Multiple Grant-In-Aid Schemes for Private Educational Institutions presently prevailing in Meghalaya. The thrust of the proposal is towards a unified scheme to be called the Meghalaya Education Grant (MEG) which aims at streamlining funding for education "without reducing existing financial support". Now this is important, as maintaining the status quo on present expenditure levels will reduce, if not abort, any possible complaints and agitations by both teachers and teaching institutions together. Under MEG, schools and colleges would receive grants based on key indicators such as enrollment, fees collected from students, infrastructure needs, and performance. The proposal seeks to ensure more effective use of public funds for better educational outcomes. It sounds good but disappointingly, remains silent over merit – merit as a benchmark for teachers deserving to teach!

We have to admit that implementing the ethnic based 40:40 reservation system in our education system, especially in the appointment of teachers has played havoc with the teaching environment. Ability and competence has been sacrificed at the altar of political populism. In many schools, especially in the rural areas, under-qualified persons impersonate as providers of knowledge and learning to our children. Meghalaya in an attempt to be politically correct has erred. It has equated providing jobs (through teacher employment) with the need to provide quality education! Two entirely different issues. This write up however has no intention of stirring up a political hornet's nest by challenging the 40:40 reservation policy. Let it continue but in our attempt to improve Education can the element of merit and aptitude be introduced as a yardstick for teacher appointment, within the constraints of our reservation policy? I believe it can be done simply because it needs to be done. At least let us try and obtain quality and talent in the teaching profession so that it delivers on what we expect from school education.

On going through the Meghalaya Education Grant (MEG) proposals, one cannot miss the underlying intention of the State Government to go in for decentralization of administration in Education and to grant more autonomy to the educational institutions of the state. In fact it speaks of strengthening institutional governance through greater autonomy in managing staff and resources. The bullet points of the draft proposal highlight (a) Increased Autonomy to SMCs and GBs (b) Minimal Government Interference (c) Unified Scheme Structure (d) Direct Simplified Fund Disbursement to SMC and GB. All this sounds very well but I sincerely hope it isn't just passing the buck and throwing a seemingly unmanageable education mess under the bus. Hope it is not a jump from the frying pan into the fire. I say this with all the authority at my command because the sponsoring bodies of most of the non-government schools have simply abandoned any Mission Mode for education and have never bothered to capacitate and prepare their School Managing Committees for the basic tasks these bodies are supposed to address. Here I speak more of church run institutions especially those in the rural areas. Interactions with heads of such institutions and their opinion of the MC and MC members forced upon them by the church is too horrifying to narrate. Priests, church elders etc., are the usual key MC members. These are perhaps people with a talent for delivering a soul searching sermon or for a 20 min-

ute boring prayer. On how to manage an educational institution however they haven't a clue! They have no interest in the institution they are supposed to help manage; need coaxing and numerous reminders before attending any MC meet; talk mostly nonsense and hardly contribute to the well being of the institution. Well the truth has to be told and this is the truth as it exists. The point here is, while decentralization is welcome, there first needs to be a programme for building the capacity of our school MCs. Otherwise, however noble the intention of MEG, the end result will be zilch!

The Discussion Paper has called for feedback from the public and I would like the Department to take this as my feedback on the proposed Meghalaya Education Grant (MEG). Placing this feedback in the public domain is to encourage others who are more experienced; qualified and enthused with the same desire to better our education system, to also air their thoughts and inputs. Teacher training is also a crucial part in Education but since my knowledge on this aspect is limited I leave it to others to fill in with what is needed. However let us not be discouraged by the latest PGI reports but take heart that there are Governments and Education Departments in other states that have introspected their problems and came up with winning solutions for their educational systems. Here I draw the reader's attention to the remarkable holistic progress made by the Education Department of the Delhi Govt under APP or of similar positive steps taken by other state government in India such as Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Considering the prevailing situation in Meghalaya perhaps a little help and facilitation from those with experience on how to revive education is required.

Browsing the internet one is impressed by the contributions to the field of education by NGOs such as PRATHAM. PRATHAM bio data is available on Google and they claim extraordinary success in undertaking training of teachers and also provide learning skills support to School Managing Committees. MEG should seriously have a closer look at the possible collaboration with such NGOs in its effort to better Education in our state. Withholding of future grants to non-government schools who refuse to participate in such capacity building training can be the strongest enticement for compliance on this score.

Meghalaya, we cannot just point fingers at the Government but rather come up with some suggestion to improve the education system. Here are some points to increase the Performance Grading Index (PGI):

1. Focus on improving the availability of teachers, their training and regular inspection of schools.
2. Adequate infrastructure including clean toilets, proper drinking water, sanitation and electricity.
3. Transparent recruitment of teachers.
4. Encourage students to complete the programs and reduce dropouts.
5. Regular monitoring of education program and evaluating its impact on students.
6. Equip schools with computers and internet connectivity to enhance learning.

I hope that the above points will be taken seriously and reach the concerned authority so that Meghalaya can become one of the top states to progress in the educational field.

Yours etc.,
Alvinson P Syiem
Shillong - 3

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Should new medical colleges focus on undergraduate or specialists training?

By Dr Sandra Albert & Prof Mayur Trivedi

On a recent visit to Mizoram, I happened to interact with senior faculty at the Zoram Medical College. The interaction made us all ponder on the challenges of maintaining a medical college in small northeastern states (especially the operational costs). Zoram medical college faces a deficit in operational costs and had asked the Centre to make it a centrally funded institute (declined). It is running with a fraction of mandated faculty. Not all are happy with the ramifications; when Mizoram set up a government medical college, the state lost its quota of reserved seats for MBBS in top medical institutions across the country.

According to the Medical Council of India, India has 780 medical colleges with 1,18,137 MBBS seats in 2024-25; the number of MBBS seats doubled from around 51,000 in 2014. A shortage of medical seats, owing to fewer medical colleges, has been cited as a common argument for the shortfall. Opening new medical colleges, therefore, remains a common response. Gujarat announced a policy to encourage public-private partnerships for the establishment of newer medical colleges to increase the supply of doctors in rural areas. Gujarat has a better overall doctor-population ratio (1:944) as compared to the national average. But ironically, only about 9% of all registered doctors serve in the public sector, resulting in a poor doctor-population ratio at 1:11475 in the government sector. The problem is not of production but of distribution.

Meghalaya has made remarkable progress in the past decade in addressing the shortage of doctors in the state. Our health personnel-to-population ratio has improved remarkably since a decade ago, when we were one of the lowest in the country. So how many additional MBBS doctors do Meghalaya's health system need? If you pose this question to senior health authorities, they will tell you that there are hardly any vacancies for MBBS doctors in our health system. But the one area that has deficits are in specialist doctors for instance at the Community Health Centres (CHCs) and district hospitals; where we have a 92% shortage. It is not just Meghalaya, this deficit in specialist doctors holds true for several states in India.

When policymakers look into this problem, their answer often is 'start medical colleges'. Sadly, that approach has not really worked even in states that have multiple medical colleges. In India, often the emphasis is on undergraduate training, and medical college could take anywhere between 10-15 years of existence before their first specialist doctor is produced. Zoram Medical College is yet to start MD and MS post graduate (PG) specialist training. At our CHCs, the key specialist doctors needed are in obstetrics, anaesthesia, surgery, family medicine and paediatrics. Even if we open three medical colleges, clearly, this approach will not address our deficit in specialist doctors in the next 30 years. Hence, we need alternative models to be looked at. A possible solution was to make our large district hospitals as postgraduate (PG) teaching institutes of the National Board (Diplomate of National Board, DNB) of the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare (MoHFW).

Recognizing that alternate models were desperately needed, the Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI) initiated the 'Design and Adoption of Alternate models for Responding to address Shortage of medical specialists' (ADARSH) project in select states. The Orissa government was one of the first adopters of the scheme. In fact, the Orissa government went a step further and preferred to offer only the two-year Diploma courses (DCH, DGO, DA etc) rather than the three-year MS/MD courses. The rationale being that as soon as the three-year degrees are completed, doctors tend to

move to tertiary care hospitals and AIIMS like institutes, thus defeating the purpose. It may be noted that the clinical training in a Diploma (2 year) or a MD/MS (3 year) is essentially the same – the difference being that MD/MS candidates get an additional year to complete a research study, with the intent to prepare them for a teaching/research career. In the primary healthcare system, clinical competencies are paramount and hence doctors with Diploma qualifications can provide services quite well. In Orissa, the first state to join the ADARSH project, to date 276 PG training seats have been created and over 137 specialist doctors have graduated at very little cost to the health system.

In Meghalaya, a MoU was signed with the state government on December 8, 2018. Through the ADARSH project, the Indian Institute of Public Health Shillong (IIPH) with PHFI Delhi has been supporting the Government of Meghalaya to get approval for PG courses in public sector hospitals. Following a gap analysis of eight districts, the number of doctors available, specialist doctor shortages, potential faculty, equipment and infrastructure requirements as per guidelines were mapped out and gaps identified. There were 145 vacancies (53%) against the 276 sanctioned posts for specialist doctors. Subsequently, three hospitals – namely Civil Hospital Shillong, Ganesh Das Government Maternal and Child Health Hospital, Maternal and Child Health Hospital, Jowai and Tura MCH Hospital – were identified for upgradation to PG teaching institutes. Following cabinet approval, filing of applications, back-and-forth correspondences with accreditation agencies and much problem-solving, the process culminated in site inspections and approvals. To date, 52 specialist training seats have been created in obstetrics, paediatrics, anaesthesiology and radio diagnosis. The mental health institute MIMHANS is on the way to be approved for psychiatry specialty!

Medical colleges that train undergraduate (MBBS) can become white elephants that are not cost effective. The sheer costs of maintaining departments like anatomy, physiology, biochemistry and many other non-clinical departments merely for undergraduate training, that are statutory requirements, can be enormous. With the sudden spurt of increased medical seats across the country, including many AIIMS like institutes, there is likely to be an oversupply of MBBS doctors in a few years. Like the situation with dentists; last year when more than 500 dental seats across the country went unfilled.

A more cost-effective approach for the current needs would be to upgrade or set up medical colleges that focus on postgraduate specialty training so as to produce the needed specialist doctors for the state. This arrangement addresses deficits while simultaneously improving the quality of services at hospitals, as the presence of trainee specialist doctors in hospitals help in improving service provision considerably. It would be worthwhile for the government to commission a cost benefit/utility study before making more nuanced decisions as they consider establishing new medical colleges. From an ongoing economic analysis that IIPH Shillong is doing with the Institute of Economic Growth, it was estimated that the state's health expenditure grew from around Rs. 300 crores in 2010-11 to Rs. 1650 crores in 2023-24. It is time we expect more allocative efficiency in our budget, as it would be unwise to spend approx. 300 crores annually to run an undergraduate medical course if projections demonstrate that scares resources can be better spent.

(Sandra Albert is the Director, Indian Institute of Public Health Shillong & Mayur Trivedi is Professor at Azim Premji University, Bhopal)

Letters to the Editor

Response to K. N. Kumar's "Resurrect the Khasi Script: Reclaim a Culture"

Editor,
I wish to thank you for K N Kumar's article, "Resurrect the Khasi Script: Reclaim a Culture!" It reminds me of a conversation on this same topic I recently had with a Higher Secondary level student who voiced his own dissatisfaction with the Khasi alphabet, because, according to him, "it's incorrect." And I happen to have made the following commentary on this topic too, in my forthcoming book "Letters to A Grandson," adapted as follows, for the purpose of this brief response:

Indeed, we need to ask if the "father" of Khasi Literature really did enough genuine study of our dialects so he could have come up with a more accurate script that best represents them in their various beautiful distinctions. Or did he just simply impose his literature on us by Romanising the Sohra dialect with the very same centralised Roman script his own people's dialects were Romanised with? And wasn't that, Romanising of our literature, done, so he and his colleagues could

centralise their conversion project?

We know how it was—the Christian Bible (appropriated ancient Jewish narratives), their particular denomination's catechism, and so on, laboriously translated into Sohra dialect by the missionaries who arrived in our Hills almost two hundred years ago. And how that one orthographically Romanised Khasi dialect became their centralised tool to indoctrinate their converts across our Khasi Hills. And wasn't that done to us because of what was done to them too? Weren't their own dialects Romanised, and centralised, into "English" when Britishers were converted into, and indoctrinated with, Roman Catholicism? Didn't that all begin with the Gregorian missionaries from Rome, under Augustine? The same Augustine who went on to become the first "Archbishop of Canterbury?" And he wasn't "Anglican" like present-day Archbishops of Canterbury are, was he?

So why don't we take a minute to think, about that particular Romanisation tool. How Romanised "religious" literature (appropriated ancient Jewish narratives) at the hands of missionaries succeeded in "converting" a majority of us into various forms of "Christianity." How those missionaries superimposed their Romanised narratives on our, once upon a time, original, narratives,

about ourselves as a people, thus turning their singular Romanised narrative into the narrative that sidelined our original narratives. And all such similar attempts to indoctrinate indigenous people everywhere with tenets of the religion of white supremacist "Christian" empires before and ever since.

And how those superimposition/conversion attempts lead all the way back to ancient Rome where it all began under Constantine. Where the indigenous Jewish Yeshua narrative was usurped, centralised, and weaponised, as the Christianisation, or shall we say, Romanisation, arm, of that empire.

Therefore, I sincerely hope Mr. Kumar's article will be looked at as a loving critique of our Literature in its present Romanised state, before Khasi earns its much yearned-for place in the Eighth Schedule.

Yours etc.,
Yona M. Nonglang,
Via email

Crisis in the Middle East

Editor,
I sincerely applaud Bhogtaram Mawroh for laying out the realities of the Middle East Crisis and for asking honest and direct questions about the Gaza genocide and more. I am equally astounded by the blind support

for genocide and the lack of empathy by 'indigenous' people for another set of indigenous people being brutally slaughtered and dispossessed of their indigenous lands as the Palestinians. This is especially regrettable as indigenous peoples from across the world stand with Palestine. I connect this to a couple of points. 1. Colonial hangover - an entrenched colonial mindset and support for colonialism. 2. Acquired Imperial racism. 3. Islamophobia. 4. Rabid religiosity. 5. Championing neo-liberal corporate profit and efficiency paradigms over principles of decency and humanity.

Yours etc.,
Roshmi Goswami,
Via email

Education system in Meghalaya

Editor,
The Performance Grading Index (PGI) is a tool developed by the Department of School Education & Literacy (DoSEL) to assess and grade the performance of states and union territories (UTs) in school education. It provides a comprehensive analysis of the education system across different states and UTs, using a uniform scale to en-

courage improvement. The Performance Grading Index (PGI) uses a set of indicators grouped under categories like Learning Outcomes & Quality, Access, Infrastructure & Facilities, Equity, and Governance Processes. These indicators provide insights into the weakness and strength of states and districts thereby improving their educational system which involves addressing specific indicators within each domain, such as teacher availability, infrastructure, and learning resource.

As per the PGI report in the previous year, Meghalaya ranked lowest among all states and union territories, with a score of 401.6. In the subsequent 2023-24 report, Meghalaya's score improved slightly to 417.9, but it remained the only state in the lowest performance band, 'Akanshi-3'. The grades are organized into categories, with the highest being 'Daksh' and the lowest being 'Akanshi-3'. The main problem of Meghalaya in the educational system is the lack of basic infrastructure, student retention which is the ability of an institution to keep students to enrol from the start of the program till its completion. In other words to minimize dropouts and maximize success. The other problem is the slow recruitment of teachers. As a concerned citizen of Me-

"To draw you must close your eyes and sing."

— Pablo Picasso

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SHILLONG, FRIDAY, JULY 4, 2025

Urn and China

THERE'S every likelihood that a major row would erupt over selection of a successor to the 14-th Dalai Lama as and when it is done. The spiritual head of Tibetans has announced that he would have a successor in the form of an incarnation, and that his own Gaden Phodrang Trust – based in Dharamshala, India – is the sole authority to identify and install that successor after his demise. China was quick to step in with a claim that the selection, when it takes place, should have Beijing's nod of agreement. It also argues that the urn kept with Beijing would be used for the draw of lots vis-à-vis the selection – meaning a direct Chinese role in the process. The Dalai Lama's followers dismiss the Chinese claim, saying the urn had been used only once in the past, in an exceptional case; and this has not been the usual norm.

Significantly, the institution of the Dalai Lama came into being in the 16th Century. The Dalai Lama is seen by Tibetan faithful and those who follow the Nalanda tradition of Buddhism elsewhere too as the incarnation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, an enlightened being whose life is meant to help those around him. China has been quite uncomfortable with the Dalai Lama's presence in India. The spiritual leader has been given refuge here by the Indian Government since 1959, when he fled Tibet following a failed native Buddhist resistance against the Chinese invasion and rule of their country. A view is that the then prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru's decision to grant asylum to the Dalai Lama and his followers provoked China to eventually usurp large swathes of India's lands in the 1962 War. Those lands still remain with China. The institution of the Dalai Lama holds a worldwide reputation also as the West, principally the US, extends its strong backing to the spiritual leader.

The Dalai Lama has himself stated unambiguously that his successor would not be a Chinese; and that China should have no role in the selection process. While the Dalai Lama had given some loud thought as to whether he should be the last in the line, and hinted at the possibility of ending the institution itself, he finally made up his mind days before his upcoming 90th birthday. Now that the air is clear, and India and the West are backing the Dalai Lama, Chinese attempts to regain control over the spiritual institution are unlikely to succeed. The Dalai Lama has also made it clear that the sacred urn, now in Chinese custody, would lose its sanctity when used in a dishonest manner. As things stand now, China will not be able to have its way. However, its future implications on relations between India and China could be serious. New Delhi will have to stand its ground and help facilitate a normal selection process as and when the need arises.

When Defiance Becomes Dishonesty: Standing with Law; Not Lawlessness

By Lyzander E Sohkhlet

As a resident of Laitumkhrah, I witness firsthand the dangerous, chaotic, and lawless effects of unregulated street vending in our locality. What others write about from an ideological distance, I live with every single day. The footpaths I am supposed to walk on are gone. The roads are choked with vendor stalls that spill out into the street. School children walking home are forced to step into moving traffic. The elderly must navigate narrow gaps between tarpaulin-covered stalls, ambulances blocked. And for people with disabilities, the message is cruel and clear: this city is not for you.

The past few days have seen a surge in editorials and letters attempting to paint street vendors in Shillong as helpless victims of a tyrannical state. Letters such as those by Bhogtoram Mawroh and Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh have struck emotional chords but distorted both the legal and factual landscape of the issue. However, I stand in full solidarity with the Government of Meghalaya, the Shillong Municipal Board, and the Meghalaya Police. These are not agents of oppression but institutions tasked with upholding order, safety and fairness in public spaces. The actions taken in Khyndai Lad were not arbitrary. They were necessary. The issue of unregulated street vending in Shillong has long been framed as a battle between livelihoods and legality. But what we are now seeing in Laitumkhrah and Khyndai Lad is no longer about survival. It is about defiance. When a section of vendors openly threatens officials from the Shillong Municipal Board and even personnel from the Meghalaya Police, one vendor even threatened officials with a machete, the situation ceases to be one of urban struggle. It becomes a matter of public order, a test of the state's ability to uphold the rule of law.

In previous articles, I highlighted the ways in which encroachments on footpaths have turned Shillong's busiest zones into blackspots for accidents. The situation near Nazareth Hospital is perhaps the most telling. Despite being a legally designated no-vending zone, the area remains packed with stalls, litter, and chaos. Ambulances often struggle to get through. Pedestrians, including students, the elderly and the differently-abled, are routinely pushed onto the roads. It is not only illegal. It is life-threatening. The Government of Meghalaya, through representatives like Paul Lyngdoh and Deputy Chief Minister

Prestone Tynsong, has taken concrete steps to resolve this issue with fairness. A legitimate vending zone has been created in the MUDA complex and other venues. These spaces, located safely off the roads and protected from the elements, have 400 stalls. So far, 248 vendors have consented to shifts as stated by T7 news. These numbers tell a different story from the narrative of victimhood some continue to peddle.

This is not an eviction without alternatives. The Government has backed the relocation with real support. Each vendor is being offered a ten thousand rupee allowance for shifting and an additional monthly support of two thousand rupees for five months. A full year of dialogue has already taken place. The Town Vending Committee has held multiple meetings with hawkers' associations. There have been repeated attempts at consensus. The State has not only offered legal space but also financial and logistical help.

And yet, a group of vendors and their supporters have chosen confrontation over cooperation. The protests outside the Secretariat, while presented as democratic expressions of dissent, were carried out in violation of Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. Moreover, several vendors were found to be operating without valid Certificates of Vending. When authorities approached to carry out verification, they were met not with documents but with threats.

We must stop romanticising such defiance. When public servants are obstructed in the line of duty, when the law is mocked, and when streets meant for everyone are hijacked by a few, the state has not only the right but the duty to act. This is not about class conflict. This is about safety, order and fairness.

Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh describes the events as a moment of "resistance." He omits, however, that some vendors physically blocked officials, refused verification of documents, and in at least one case, wielded a machete. This is not democratic protest. This is open defiance of the law. Romanticising such behaviour is not only irresponsible but dangerous.

Bhogtoram Mawroh, similarly, quotes legal provisions selectively to argue that the Government is acting outside the law. He references holding capacity norms and relocation ethics. What he fails to mention is that four

hundred stalls have already been built in the MUDA complex and more, 248 vendors have already consented to move as stated by T7 news, and financial assistance has been offered. This is not forced eviction. This is structured relocation. Mawroh and Pyrtuh present a false binary: that to defend law and order is to oppose the poor. That to uphold traffic rules is to be anti-people. This is a dangerous argument. The poor do not benefit from chaos. They benefit from safe streets, walkable footpaths, and fair systems. So do students. So do workers. So does everyone.

The law on this is crystal clear. Section 10, sub-section (1) of the Street Vendors Act, 2014 states that every street vendor must operate strictly according to the conditions mentioned in the certificate of vending. Anything outside that framework is unlawful. Section 283 of the Indian Penal Code makes obstruction of public ways a punishable offence. These laws were created to ensure a balance between the right to vend and the right to move freely and safely. The judiciary has affirmed this balance. In the Municipal Corporation of Delhi versus Gurnam Kaur case of 1989, the Supreme Court ruled that vendors do not have an absolute right to trade on public roads if it causes obstruction. In Sudhir Madan versus the Municipal Corporation of Delhi in 2007, the Delhi High Court ordered the eviction of unauthorised hawkers and reiterated that public convenience must be upheld.

We cannot have one standard for parked cars and another for vendor stalls. If illegally parked vehicles are towed away without debate, why do illegal stalls enjoy impunity? Why are the rights of pedestrians, especially vulnerable ones, always secondary to the loudest group on the street? Even the High Court of Meghalaya, in its order dated September 6, 2024, directed the Public Works Department to stop the dumping of construction material on roads and pavements. The reasoning was clear. Obstructions put lives at risk. If the law recognises cement bags as threats to safety, how can a network of unregulated stalls in front of hospitals, schools, and busy intersections be seen any differently?

The stories of abuse faced by people like Bertina Lyngdoh, a visually impaired PhD scholar (As stated by her personally, in an episode

of TST's Let's Talk), should shake our conscience. Her account of being verbally attacked for simply asking for space on a public path is not an isolated incident. This is the everyday reality of many citizens in Shillong who are being told, in effect, that their right to safety and dignity matters less.

Those who claim that street vendors "make our streets safer" must reckon with the facts. It was not safety when officials were threatened with a machete. It was not safety when differently abled students are verbally assaulted for simply asking for space. It is not safety when footpaths are so thoroughly occupied that ambulances crawl through clogged roads near hospitals. The poor do not benefit from chaos. The truly vulnerable, the elderly, the differently-abled, children suffer first when order collapses. If these are the fruits of romanticised resistance, then let us have no illusions about what this resistance stands for.

I urge citizens not to be misled by half-truths dressed in moral outrage. This is not about targeting livelihoods. It is about restoring order. The vendors who have accepted relocation have shown maturity and respect for the law. Those who threaten officials and resist verification are not engaging in protest. They are breaking the law. Let us be honest. The streets of Shillong cannot continue to function as informal marketplaces without endangering lives. The Government has tried dialogue. It is now enforcing the law. It is right to do so. If public order collapses, the most vulnerable always suffer first. And if those enforcing the law are vilified, the rule of law becomes meaningless.

The Government is not the villain here. It is the only institution still trying to hold things together.

Those who break the law under the banner of struggle must be told that rights come with responsibilities. Protest is a right, but threats are not. Vending is protected, but only when done within the law. The Government has shown restraint, compassion, and patience. It is now time for enforcement. The state must act firmly against those who continue to defy the law. If threats against police and municipal staff go unpunished, it sends the worst possible message. That intimidation works. That force wins over fairness. And that the rule of law is negotiable.

It is not. And it must not be.

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Anti Poverty Campaign : Lessons from Nujiang, China

By Rudi Warjri

A section of the media had published an article, "Rural China's March from Poverty to Prosperity: What We Can Learn from Nujiang" by Sudheendra Kulkarni. A close aide of former Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, I had met Kulkarni around that time. This newspaper had on June 27, 2025 published an op-ed "Meghalaya's poverty is at the root of its poor educational outcomes" by Patricia Mukhim. Subsequently, The Shillong Times also published a letter to the editor, "Poverty and Poor Learning" by Glenn C Kharkongor. A common thread running through these writings is the word "Poverty" and how to remedy it.

My attempt is to abridge the lengthy article by Kulkarni, particularly because he astutely remarked about the resemblance between Yunnan, China's southwestern province and India's Northeast. Yunnan's geographical features, its folklore, music, dance, social customs, the facial appearance of its people, and their traditional attire – not to speak of its breathtaking beauty resembles India's North East. The Ahom dynasty, which ruled present-day Assam for nearly 600 years, was descended from the Tai race that migrated from Yunnan province.

The article focused on Nujiang an administrative region in Yunnan the Southwestern province of China. Until eight years ago, Nujiang was one of the three poorest rural regions in China. Today, like the rest of China, it is a picture of visible prosperity. How did it achieve this dramatic transformation?

Role of Local Self Government

Kulkarni stressed on the role of the local government, as part of its anti-poverty campaign. People needed jobs. Among the many job-creating economic activities the government identified was tourism. Nujiang, with its lush green mountains, lucid rivers and clean air offers unique tourism potentials. Over 98 percent of the region comprises high mountain canyons and thick forests. Nearly 80 percent of the area has a gradient of over 25 degrees. The poverty rate here was more than nine times the national average.

The challenging strategy adopted was to take each family as a target for poverty eradication. This strategy is premised on the fact that poverty can have different root causes, such as illness, disability, poor infrastructure, weak market connectivity, lack of education and employable skills or shortage of production funds. These call for differentiated solutions for different families and areas. Besides facilitating employment for income, the government assured food security and clothing, and guaranteed basic medical services, safe housing with drinking water and electricity, and free and compulsory education for nine years.

Each poor family had its own digital file in the national database. A national and provincial information platform created for real-time monitoring of poverty alleviation kept track of the progress of each targeted family and village. The Beijing-based International Poverty Reduction Centre in China (IPRCC) conducted meticulous research of the Chinese experience, and shared it with global audiences.

Rural Revitalization

This aims to consolidate the gains from poverty alleviation, achieve greater productivity in agriculture, develop specialty industries in rural areas supported by modern technologies and locally trained talent while promoting greater rural-urban integration. It prioritizes the use of renewable energy, protection of the intangible cultural heritage of the countryside, and further improvement in the living standards of the rural people.

Focus on Sustainable Employment

Infrastructure development has played a key role in transforming the economic and social life in Nujiang. A new airport, expressway, highway, bridges, energy pipelines, solar farms and water transport facilities have been built. Travel time to remote areas is drastically reduced. Yang Wenwen, the Chinese guide who works in the finance department of the Nujiang local government, said in some cases it has been cut from over 24 hours to just 10 minutes.

Digital technology has enabled local villagers to sell agricultural products and handicrafts to markets across China via booming e-commerce platforms, such as Taobao and Jing-

dong, Pinduoduo. Through live-streaming apps and short video platforms like Wechat, Tiktok and Kuaihou, the government promotes local scenery and industries, while farmers market goods and tourism services.

Tsaoko is a spice used in Chinese cuisine. A decade ago, Yunnan Agriculture University and private enterprises teamed up to produce a wide range of tsaoko-based innovative products – medicines, beverages, cosmetics, seasoning spices, cookies and so on – all nicely packaged and sold across China. The new approach involves a full industrial chain focusing on large-scale planting, standardised cultivation and hit-tech harvesting and processing. Since transportation is difficult in mountains, drones are used to transport the tsaoko harvest – up to 50 kilograms over three kilometres in just four minutes – to processing workshops.

Thus, tsaoko has proved to be a "golden fruit," yielding a ten-fold increase in farmers' incomes. Nujiang is today the largest tsaoko planting area in China. Different types of honey and a wide variety of walnut-based products, including walnut juice, are produced in the park and over 140 species of aromatic plants used in edible and healthcare products have been introduced here.

Like Assam, Yunnan grows both tea and coffee. While Assam has focused only on branding its tea, Yunnan has developed both its tea and coffee industries in a big way and now accounts for 98% of China's total coffee production.

Relocating the Poor

Perhaps the most striking evidence of the success of China's anti-poverty programme is the relocation of large numbers of poor people from their inaccessible homes in the mountains to modern multi-storied apartments in urban areas. Near the community centre is a government-run primary and secondary school, with digital classrooms and well-equipped science laboratories, an arts and crafts workshop, and a special hall for teaching English. Most students in this school are from ethnic minority families. Students use AI to correct their English pronunciation.

Rural tourism

No country in the world has developed rural tourism as a conscious strategy for poverty eradication the way China has. In the first quarter of 2024, China's rural areas received over 780 million tourists. Nujiang itself is an example. City-dwellers from Yunnan and other provinces are attracted to its secluded and scenic spots, its spectacular landscapes and the rich cultural heritage of its multi-ethnic communities. Over 50,000 people in Nujiang have found employment opportunities in tourism and related industries.

Yangpo is a village located high up on the Gaoligong mountain range, some of whose peaks rise over 5,000 metres. Yangpo, remote and inaccessible, was steeped in poverty about a decade ago. The local government upgraded all the houses with its funds, keeping their traditional look intact. Villagers were supported to build extra rooms to accommodate tourists. Some were given loans to build comfortable inns, restaurants and shops, all in the traditional rustic style. An open-air theatre was created for a village band to perform and entertain tourists. Result: the village has developed a thriving B&B industry. Hundreds of tourists come here each day for an experience that harmonizes the natural beauty of mountains with the traditional culture of Yunnan. Not everything in Yangpo is traditional. On top of one mountain ridge, overlooking a valley framed by two hills sacred to the Lisu and Bai ethnic groups, stood a spectacularly modern building. It is the Nujiang Grand Canyon Bookstore established by Librairie Avant-Garde.

Kulkarni wrote "Our northeastern states, as well as the rest of India, can learn a lesson or two from China's modernization."

Evidently it is the command and control system in China that ensures cohesion and expedition implementation. Nevertheless, the strategies adopted can still be emulated and suitably modified to suit the ecosystem in Meghalaya; the Northeast or India. Even if 25% of the Nujiang model is achieved the outcome would be remarkable. (The writer is retired diplomat – Email: rwarjri@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

Applauding hawker relocation— Now extend it to other areas

Editor,
First of all, I would like to sincerely appreciate the steps taken by the Government in relocating street hawkers to a proper and designated space at the MUDA Complex. As pedestrians, we are truly grateful that we finally have the right to walk freely and safely on footpaths. Earlier, most of these public spaces were occupied by hawkers who, in the name of feeding their families, had completely overtaken sidewalks—causing major inconvenience and safety concerns for the general public.

The government has not only relocated them but has also provided significant financial support. Each eligible vendor received Rs 10,000 to help set up their business in the new location. In addition, the government is providing Rs 2,000 per month for a period of five months to help them sustain themselves until their shops become fully operational. I believe this is an extraordinary and compassionate move, and perhaps the best any Government has taken in recent years to balance public order and vendor

welfare.
With this level of support, one must ask—what more do hawkers need? It is unreasonable for them to insist on setting up wherever foot traffic is high. Public spaces must be respected and shared fairly.

I would also like to urge the authorities to replicate this effort in other areas, especially in Laitumkhrah—from Police Point to the Fire Brigade junction and up to the Nazareth Hospital stretch. In this area, stalls are literally set up on the roads, and people sit right beside moving vehicles to eat puri and other street food. This poses serious safety risks and worsens the traffic congestion.

It is time we ensure public spaces serve the needs of all citizens—not just a few. The Government's current initiative is a shining example of how thoughtful policy can make a real difference, and it should be extended to all parts of the city.

Yours etc,
P Majaw
Shillong-1

Appeal for justice & protection

Editor,
I write this letter with great pain and concern on behalf of the Marwari community of Shillong. The recent unfortunate incident

that occurred outside the Economic Medical Hall in Police Bazar has left our community shocked and deeply disturbed. Not only has this incident targeted a respected member of our Singhania family, but it has also reopened old wounds of fear, discrimination, and helplessness that many of us have been quietly carrying for years.

Since the inception of the state of Meghalaya, non-tribal communities—especially the business community—have been the target of constant threats, harassment, and extortion by various groups such as the KSU, FKJGP, HYC, HITO, and others. Today, things have escalated to a level where we are even receiving direct threats from a banned organisation. This is extremely alarming and puts the lives and livelihoods of peace-loving citizens at serious risk.

We are proud contributors to the state's economy and have always respected the culture and sentiments of the local people. Yet, we are being treated unfairly, with no sense of security or equal rights. Our shops, our families, and our very presence are often under threat.

We humbly request the Government and the law enforcement authorities to take serious note of this situation. We need immediate and visible police protection for our people and our establishments, especially in and around Police Bazar

and other high-risk areas. We cannot continue to live in fear while doing honest work and serving the people of Meghalaya.

We would also like to express our full support to the Government's recent actions against illegal hawkers in Police Bazar. These unauthorised encroachments not only cause disruption and congestion but often create flashpoints for such violence and lawlessness. It is time to reclaim public spaces and restore order, cleanliness, and safety in the heart of our city.

The Marwari community stands united and strong in condemning these acts of intimidation. We believe in peace, mutual respect, and the rule of law. We only ask for what is every citizen's right—security, dignity, and justice.

Yours etc.,
V. Singhania
Via email

Desperate times call for desperate measures

Editor,
It was heartening to note that Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong has stated that the Government will act under the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014. This

marks a change in the government's journey from attempting to impose an illegal law to acknowledging its adherence to the law. But then in the next sentence he says, "It matters little whether it is a Provisional Town Vending Committee (PTVC) or a full-fledged Town Vending Committee as long as it is operational". These are contradictory statements.

Whether the TVC is full-fledged or provisional is a very critical matter. According to the CHAPTER VII, TOWN VENDING COMMITTEE section 22 (2) "Each Town Vending Committee shall consist of: (d) the number of members representing the street vendors shall not be less than forty per cent who shall be elected by the street vendors themselves in such manner as may be prescribed". The Act mandates the TVC include at least 40% (or more) hawker representation, elected by the hawkers themselves according to its provisions. This achieves two things: The process does not marginalise hawkers' interests, and it is democratic, reflecting the principles of our Constitution. At the moment, no elections have taken place because the process of certification is not yet complete with objections still being redressed.

The Hawkers association claims that the licensing process has granted licenses to non-genuine hawkers while ignoring genuine ones. So,

the provisional TVC does not adhere to the law. The statement that the Government is going to follow the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, therefore is completely false. It looks likely that the issue will return to the court, most probably the Supreme Court. The case in the High Court took over 6 years. This time it might take over 10 years. So, the issue is again going to be pushed to the back burner to become someone else's problem.

On a side note, one of the most iconic pictures of the entire eviction was of a hawker raising a sledge (axe) against the authorities who had come to evict her. A thousand years ago, a mother took up the wait (Khasi machete) to avenge the killing of her daughter. But when she could not find the killer, she flung herself from a cliff—from which emerged a waterfall whose beauty we all enjoy to this day. Today, another mother has raised a sledge to protect her children from starvation. What happens to her will speak volumes about the conscience of our society.

Yours etc.,
Bhogtoram Mawroh,
Via email

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"Independence is happiness."

— Susan B. Anthony

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Press Freedom Vrs Court Judgments

THE confrontation between the Hawkers Association and the state police on June 30 last in the Police Bazar area also led to an altercation between the owner of a pharmacy and hawkers in front of whose establishment they had established their trade. Following this, the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) a banned militant outfit currently in talks with Government of India, sent out a press release admonishing and threatening the pharmacy owner and his family with dire consequences for daring to take issue with hawkers who are indigenous to Meghalaya and rightful owners of the land. The pharmacy is probably one of the oldest in the area. The HNLC had, as usual, issued a press release to this effect in the name of Winner H Mark, its publicity secretary. The name is probably a pseudonym.

On May 27, 2015, the High Court of Meghalaya had taken up a suo-moto case against banned militant organisations issuing a bandh call after it found that the district courts and government establishments were paralysed as their staff were unable to report for duties on account of the intimidatory nature of the bandh call by the HNLC. The then DGP, Rajiv Mehta was summoned to give his side of the story and he agreed that without the media publishing news of a bandh call the public would have no information about it. As such the Meghalaya High Court banned all media from carrying out any release related to bandh calls by any group and more so a banned outfit. It stated upfront that any attempt by any media house to violate the order would amount to contempt of court. Most newspapers and electronic media outlets did not carry the recent HNLC release although it was not related to a bandh call. Some however did on the plea that the release was intimidatory in nature and if not carried and should some untoward incident befall the person/persons against whom the threat was levelled at, then the media would be held accountable for dereliction of duty.

It may be mentioned that the Meghalaya Editors and Publishers' Association (MEPA) had in 2016 approached the apex court which rejected the appeal and directed the Association to go to the Meghalaya High Court. The MEPA had to withdraw the petition with costs amounting to Rs 2000. [Case no MC (WP(C)) No.78 of 2016]. MEPA was directed to deposit the amount with the Director of Social Welfare, Government of Meghalaya for the benefits of the inmates of Juvenile Home within thirty days. MEPA was required to produce the receipt of such deposit in the Court Registry within sixty days. The ambiguity surrounding the Meghalaya High Court order needs to be dispelled. Should the media discard all news from a banned militant outfit or should the media only disregard news related to bandh calls? The High Court of Meghalaya needs to clarify this point to avoid any ambivalence. The duty of the media is to inform and if such information which is unrelated to bandh calls is withheld merely because it is issued by a banned outfit, then is not press freedom a casualty?

Tourism Economy in the Land of The Clouds Versus Sex and Crime

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

The murder of Raja Raghuvanshi was both tragic and complex. While others are milking money and raising their TRPs from this incident, I must commend the stakeholders, especially the citizens of Hima Sohra and the State, for handling it tactfully, responsibly and with compassion. Undoubtedly, local intelligence from Police personnel down to tourist guides and community participation have helped solve the murder case which spanned over three States as of now.

Meghalaya's USP for Tourism Industry: Meghalaya's USP for tourism is found in its natural bounty and beauty. Kong Helen Giri, in her book, 'The Khasi Under the British Rule (1990)', describes to us the vivid beauty in these words, "Khasi and Jaintia Hills is a plateau of rolling grasslands, meandering rivers, green rolling hills sloping towards the plains and valleys with deep gorges and precipitous ravines. It has a unique and fascinating beauty, typical and natural in its own way. Coming down from the plains, one feels delighted and refreshed to pass through the sweet scented breeze of the whispering pines...The caves and hot springs full of wonder, the crystal streams and springs all add to the inexhaustible stock of natural beauty. It abounds in magnificent cascading waterfalls, fringed with wide variety of beautiful ferns, moss and orchids..."

Similarly, Milton Sangma, another historian and authority on Garo History and Culture, describes the Garo Hills as, "gifted with beautiful waterfalls and lakes which abound with fishes and eels etc. It has also beautiful plateaus and landscapes connected with traditional folklores and religious beliefs... The Garo Hills are the abode of wild animals and birds, such as elephants, tigers, leopards, wild pigs, wild cats, deer of various kinds, bison, wild goats...There are also many rare and interesting birds including hornbills, partridges, pheasants, teals, snipes, geese, duck, drongos etc. The Hills are also rich in variegated flora, orchids of various kinds and other medicinal herbs..." (Milton Sangma, History and Culture of the Garos, 1984).

The foothill of tourists in the State is expected to rise this year and apparently Meghalaya's tourism industry looks very promising than ever. Investment in tourism sector in the State has increased manifolds and citizens are upfront in investing in it with government's support. For now private local investments are of medium and small scale in the form of establishing homestays, resorts, "dukan Sha and Ja" (food and tea stall), cafes,

restaurants, private and community parks, handicrafts stalls and management of amenities in tourist spots etc. No big investments have been made so far, excepting government's promotion by organising international concerts, festivals etc, providing subsidized tourists' cabs, Meghalaya Homestay scheme and infrastructures like roads etc.

Although, as per reports (2023-24) the contribution of tourism to State's GDP was only 4.1% and accounted for a meagre 2.87 % of the total employment, but tourism can be considered as major player in creating employment and income generation activities in the State. There is no

outside to enter tourist places in Sohra had nearly upset the entire tourism industry and could have resulted in loss of crores of revenue. Even a simple and irresponsible reporting on the tragic death of Raja Raghuvanshi which had projected Meghalaya as a crime-infested state had nearly pushed the tourism economy into a tailspin.

By and large Meghalaya is an ecotourism destination and its growth solely depends on the gifts of nature. Therefore, the sustainability of our ecology is crucial not just for the sake of tourism economy, but for the survival of the indigenous ethnicity, culture and practices. The degraded state of the environment is

"Although in Meghalaya sex work or prostitution cannot be directly linked to tourism and there is no data or evidences or research studies conducted to prove the existence of sex tourism in Meghalaya."

data available to ascertain the exact number of established homestays, however the Government of Meghalaya through the homestay scheme aims to construct 5000 homestay facilities between the years 2023-24 and 2027-28. The Government has also projected to build 1000 homestays in the year 2023-24. Let us assume that the 1000 homestays promised by the Government had been built and commissioned. On an average, if one homestay earns Rs 3000 per day and in 30 days the turnover would be Rs 90,000 and 1000 homestays will generate a turnover of Rs 90,000,000 monthly. Further, if one homestay employs on an average three workers then 1000 homestays can absorb 3000 workers. But again, what is the condition of workers who are working in tourism sector in the State? Are they being paid well? Are their rights and entitlements being protected by law?

The Question of Viability and Sustainability of Tourism Industry: The numbers above look huge, but the viability and sustainability of Tourism industry is always a critical concern. Tourism non-viability can manifest in various forms such as over-tourism impacting natural ecosystem and local communities or tourism dependent economies facing risks from external factors like natural disaster or political instability. Undeniably, tourism industry is a fragile one and is susceptible to a number of internal and external shocks. Recently, the wild cat agitation which had prevented tourist taxis from

very alarming and unless some radical measures are taken by every stake holder to arrest this environmental decay, the indigenous people of Meghalaya are heading for a disaster sooner than we thought. Way back in 1984 Milton Sangma had lamented about the threat that Garo hills was facing due to wanton destruction of forests by unscrupulous administrators and businessmen. Against this backdrop the tourism economy in Meghalaya is evolving and how do we balance economic benefits with environmental preservation and social responsibility?

Sex and Crime: The Moral Challenge

Although in Meghalaya sex work or prostitution cannot be directly linked to tourism and there is no data or evidences or research studies conducted to prove the existence of sex tourism in Meghalaya. But sex work is the underbelly of Shillong and this clandestine trade is thriving and caters to both "local" and "non-local" clientele. Walking around at night from the Khyndai Lad point into the road stretch behind the Assembly office on a weekend one would be accosted by a good number of pimps who would facilitate instant appointments with sex workers. There is nothing judgemental here, but this area is an open space where pimping/offering sex service for a price is a daily affair to satisfy the carnal desires of both "locals residents" and "visitors". Perhaps there are also those who operate privately and independently via phones etc and they may outnumber those who cajole their clients in the streets. However, specific data on the

committed against children, and 628 crimes committed against women.

The vigorous investigation into the murder of a man and an outsider stands in sharp contrast to the comparative lack of attention given to local women and children victims for which there is sobering statistical evidence.

The question is, why are crimes against women and children in Meghalaya considered differently? Why aren't they getting the same instant, high level response? Local activists claim that the majority of such cases are dismissed as 'family matters', and under reporting is due to social stigma and insufficient support services. The absence is indicative of institutionalized barriers and prejudices in police and society.

The following changes are called for: 1. Prompt and open investigations into all violent offenses irrespective of the victim's age, gender and community. 2. Increased protection and reporting systems, including help lines, legal assistance, and outreach. 3. Generat-

numbers of sex workers in Meghalaya is lacking, but in 2023 the police crack-down on alleged sex workers in and around Khyndai Lad area had compelled the State to respond via its Minister, "that any woman that stands on the street cannot be termed as sex worker as this needs verification. We need...to verify before you can consider every woman standing on the road as a sex worker...there should be specific parameters and indicators to suggest such..."

The State has responded maturely when it comes to sex work in the city, but more than that it has to adopt multi-pronged approaches to address this issue and with the sharp rise of HIV/AIDS infections, the State must take top priority in policy making and implementing various schemes for the benefit of sex workers, especially female sex workers.

Sex trade is as old as human civilization and today the sex industry ranks third in the illegal businesses that bring huge profits, after drugs and arms trafficking. Ciprian Nimara describes, "sex tourism as a well known phenomenon worldwide, being a silent industry, but in full expansion. It is often assimilated to activities in the field of prostitution due to the use of services offered by this industry in the destination country." Perhaps this will be the greatest challenge for moralistic Meghalaya. Is the society ready to be open minded and in the near future allow sex tourism to take centre stage? Or will it remain conservative as ever? And how moral policing will impact the growing tourism economy in Meghalaya?

Crime acts as a significant impediment to tourism by negatively impacting tourist safety, destination image and ultimately, tourist footfalls and revenue. A perceived or actual increase in crime can deter potential visitors and discourage repeat visits, leading to economic losses and reputational damage for affected destinations. Crime, including theft, assault and fraud directly affects tourists' safety and experiences, making them less likely to return to the destination or recommend it to others.

The other recent incident of crime which the Meghalaya police were able to crack was the case of theft of materials worth lakh of rupees and fifty thousand in cash which were stolen from the vehicle used by the tourists and parked by the roadside near an eatery in Mawblei, Shillong.

Another big challenge for the State is to ensure that Meghalaya is free not only from tourism related crimes, but also to contain the fluid political situation which may lead to breakdown in law and order.

After passing the big beautiful bill in the house, Trump may be more autocratic

Can the democratic party meet his challenge in 2026 mid-term elections?

By Sushil Kutty

July 4, big day for the United States, and President Donald Trump's "signature piece of legislation", his 'Big Beautiful Bill' is on his desk in the 'Oval Office' for his sprawling signature. 'BBB' was passed on Thursday and includes trillions of dollars in tax and spending cuts. It also ramps up funding for defense and to implement President Trump's immigration agenda.

The Congress voted 218 to 214 to approve 'BBB'. Two Republicans joined the Democrats in opposing the bill. 'BBB' was passed in the Senate earlier this week. Reports say President Trump's cohorts believe Trump is beyond and above every other United States President to date. Previous President Joe Biden is unlucky he was born in America at the same time as President Trump.

Give President Trump a torch and he will do a lap of the White House perimeter. MAGA supporters are too thrilled at Trump's triumph. It is a different thing that the White House is used to such triumphant times and wouldn't be adding another "Wing" to mark Trump's Triumph!

Also, there are those who believe President Trump can't celebrate till as long as there are native Indians to remind him, people like Trump, that they're interlopers, and illegal occupiers. Problem is President Trump doesn't believe in "We Won", he is through and through a "I, Me & Mine" person.

But 'BBB' went through the hoop clean as a whistle and President Trump's got reason to gloat at the bloated bill. That Trump will be a rampaging bull in the China Shop from henceforth to Kingdom Come is a certainty. And BBB will be hanging from the Oval Wall for Trump's ego to swamp the globe.

Important thing is, President Trump's got the dough now for implementing all his ideas, no-brainers as well as the 'harebrained'. Trump is a self-admitted wheeler-dealer and likely harbours the wish to turn rubble and ruins to blood and glory. A Riviera out of bombed Gaza.

Trump doesn't betray thoughts of the hunger pangs of the man in the queue. Trump never ever thought of removing homelessness and squalor from America's richest cities? Trump will

sign 'BBB' at a ceremony at the White House on the July 4 holiday with plumb and aplomb. GOP leaders, even those who opposed 'BBB', are brushing their tuxedos.

Internal opposition was laid to rest before BBB's final passage. Republican members who balked will be facing the MAGA people. Does that include the world's richest man Elon Musk? This father of 14 said 'BBB' should be booted out and was willing to go to war with Trump, forget deportation.

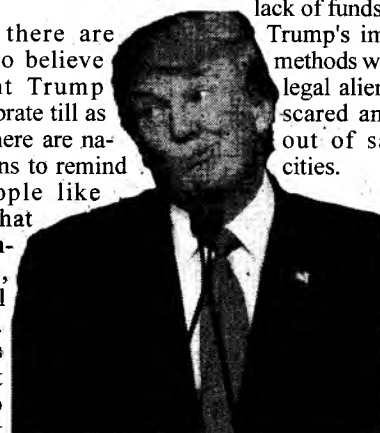
The Senate played its part in 'BBB' going through. GOP leaders played their part as the Opposition settled for a final showdown. One Democrat spoke for 8 hours and 44 minutes. For sheer ugly talkativeness and rhetoric, this man made crows eat crow and still managed to lose!

'BBB' would add \$3.4 trillion to federal deficits over the next 10 years. Millions will live and die without health insurance. There will be cuts to Medicaid and to programmes linked to the Affordable Care Act. Funds for immigration enforcement drives will never lag for lack of funds. President Trump's immigration methods will keep "illegal aliens" forever scared and running out of sanctuary cities.

Trump used Truth Social to keep up the pressure on anti-BBB Republicans, telling them,

"FOR REPUBLICANS, THIS SHOULD BE AN EASY YES VOTE. RIDICULOUS!!!", and "What are the Republicans waiting for??? What are you trying to prove??? MAGA IS NOT HAPPY, AND IT'S COSTING YOU VOTES!!!!" That proved to be the last straw on the camel's back and BBB cut through opposition like a knife on butter.

The rival Democratic Party fought bitterly both in the Senate and the House of Representatives to defeat Trump's BBB. The Democrats are saying that the common Americans are angry with Trump at the denial of many existing facilities in the Bill and this will have an impact on the midterm elections in November 2026. It is to be seen whether Trump turns out more authoritarian after his latest win or he reforms himself before his next poll battle with the Democratic Party at the national level. (IPA Service)



Letters to the Editor

A Response To: "Resurrect Khasi Script : Reclaim A Culture" by K. N Kumar

Editor, I read the above article. All I can say is, is that it is a well-intended writing, nothing more. Yes, like many mundane talks on the issue of language, dialect, culture, it wakes us up to some critical points which need thread-bare discussion.

This Culture is not a material one, or the one which can be reclaimed as said by the author. Our knowledge system is, one can say, metaphysical. That a majority of us fail to understand it, is because of the same nature of it. One professor of Philosophy, NEHU, in a journal said that the tribal philosophies don't measure up to its Indian counterpart in that according to what he said, "we have only metric intelligence". But after I told him about our philosophy,

he agreed to my view. In a capsule form, our culture can be classified under the two layers- The phenomenal and the noumenal. The apparent sides of it are those that rise and fall like the waves in the ocean; while the noumenal side is the ocean water in which all changes take place. Our cosmology, nature of existence in the cosmos, tell it all. The language of our shamans, mainly in dialects is a storehouse of the quintessential knowledge and wisdom living in its oral form.

Another is - not having the script cannot be equated with being backward ; a belief that needs a revisit. Language, from my layman's knowledge, comes first, and the scripts are only a device to translate the spoken language into a written form. I believe all human civilizations begin from this root.

The Roman scripts are not sufficient to transcribe the pronunciation of dialects. I studied the phonetics of British English (queen's English) and can pronounce unfamiliar words just by looking at the transcrip-

tion including the accents. Hence English is rich in vowel sounds, but not rich enough to transcribe the pronunciation of some local dialects of ours. Some words from Mawphu, Tynrong, Mawshuit, maybe more, will never be sufficiently, correctly be represented by such phonetic symbols.

This is the richness of Khasi language. Funnily, if there's a place where the story of the "Babel of words" originated from, it must have been from here.

The Roman scripts have served us for nearly two centuries, and we are grateful to Thomas Jones for having given us the simplest scripts which even three-year olds can write. No turning back!

Yours etc., lasaid Khongjee, Via email

A Call for Equitable Justice in Meghalaya

Editor, The brutal killing of 29

year old Raja Raghuvanshi in Cherrapunji brought forth a strong and swift reaction from the Meghalaya police. A Special Investigation Team was constituted within days, drones and sniffers were put to work, and media attention highlighted the public assurances and swift apprehension of the suspects.

While speedy action in this case is an admirable demonstration of the urgency for justice, there have been calls questioning why this speed is never accorded when women or children are victims of heinous crimes. This is especially distressing given the statistics on violence against these vulnerable populations in Meghalaya.

For Meghalaya, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS 4 2015-16) reported that 14% of women reported experiencing violence, of whom only 12% sought help. Statistics from NFHS 5 (2019-21) reveal that 16% of women had experienced physical or sexual violence; but only 36% of them had sought assistance. According to Meghalaya police data for 2023, 512 crimes were

committed against children, and 628 crimes committed against women.

The vigorous investigation into the murder of a man and an outsider stands in sharp contrast to the comparative lack of attention given to local women and children victims for which there is sobering statistical evidence.

The question is, why are crimes against women and children in Meghalaya considered differently? Why aren't they getting the same instant, high level response? Local activists claim that the majority of such cases are dismissed as 'family matters', and under reporting is due to social stigma and insufficient support services. The absence is indicative of institutionalized barriers and prejudices in police and society.

The following changes are called for: 1. Prompt and open investigations into all violent offenses irrespective of the victim's age, gender and community. 2. Increased protection and reporting systems, including help lines, legal assistance, and outreach. 3. Generat-

ing awareness to counter victim silencing norms and gender-sensitivity training for police. 4. Use of NFHS and National Crime Records Bureau data as a roadmap for evidence based interventions.

The rapid investigation into the killing of Raja Raghuvanshi shows what can happen when political will, state resources, media and public pressure converge. The same rapidity and transparency must be applied to Meghalaya's silent victims: women and children whose lives are at risk daily. If justice has to be equal, all lives have to matter equally.

Yours etc... Ardonister Lyngdoh Via email

Challenges Faced by Meghalaya's Hill farmers

Editor, I write this to highlight the unseen challenges faced by hill farmers in Meghalaya who play an important role

in growing food and supporting the local economy. But they face many problems that make farming difficult and reduces their income.

One big problem is the hilly land and poor roads. It is hard to transport crops to the markets, so farmers depend on middlemen. These middlemen often pay very low prices. For example, in places like Mawthadraishan, when farmers grow a lot of squash, they are not able to sell everything. There are no proper markets or storage places, so the extra squashes rot or has to be sold cheap. Farmers in Laitlyngkot, East Khasi Hills also face similar problems. Many of them grow vegetables like cabbages, carrots, and potatoes. But due to bad roads and no proper transport system, they find it hard to take their produce to big markets like Shillong. Sometimes, they have to throw away fresh vegetables because they spoil quickly and there is no cold storage. The farmers here also say they get very little support from the government and have to depend on their own efforts. Climate change is mak-

ing things worse. Rain does not come on time, and the weather is becoming hotter. This affects the usual time whenever farmers plant their crops. Also, there is no special farming policy for hilly areas. Therefore many government support programs and various schemes are not used properly.

Farmers also use traditional and labor-heavy methods because there are no machines or help from the government. This makes farming harder and more expensive. To help the farmers, the government needs to build better roads, create cold storage and markets, promote farming methods that can handle changing weather, and make a special plan for hill farming. These steps can help hill farmers, including those in Laitlyngkot, Mawthadraishan etc., get better prices and improve their lives.

Yours etc., Nafisa Marwein, Via email

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

War, politics, religion shape wildlife evolution in cities

People often consider evolution to be a process that occurs in nature in the background of human society.

But evolution is not separate from human beings. In fact, human cultural practices can influence evolution in wildlife. This influence is highly pronounced in cities, where people drastically alter landscapes to meet their own needs.

Human actions can affect wildlife evolution in a number of ways. If people fragment habitat, separated wildlife populations can evolve to be more and more different from each other.

If people change certain local conditions, it can pressure organisms in new ways that mean different genes are favoured by natural selection and passed on to offspring - another form of evolution that can be driven by what people do.

In a recent review, evolutionary biologists Marta Szulkin, Colin Garroway and I, in collaboration with scientists spread across five continents, explored how cultural processes - including religion, politics and war - shape urban evolution.

We reviewed dozens of empirical studies about urban wildlife around the globe. Our work highlights which human cultural practices have and continue to shape the evolutionary trajectory of wild animals and plants.

Religious practices

If you've travelled internationally, you may have noticed the menu at any one McDonald's restaurant is shaped by the local culture of its location.

In the United Arab Emirates, McDonald's serves an entirely halal menu. Vegetarian items are common and no beef is served in Indian McDonald's.

And in the United States, McDonald's Filet-O-Fish is especially popular during Lent when observant Catholics don't consume meat on Fridays.

Similarly, ecosystems of cities are shaped by local cultural practices. Because all wildlife

are connected to the environment, cultural practices that alter the landscape shape the evolution of urban organisms.

For example, in Oviedo, Spain, people constructed walls around religious buildings between the 12th and 16th centuries. This division of the city led to different populations of fire salamanders inside and outside the walls.

Because salamanders can't scale these walls, those on opposite sides became isolated from

be missing.

In the same way, genes that are overrepresented on one side of the wall can be in low numbers or missing on the other side. That's genetic drift.

Introducing non-native wildlife is another way people can alter urban ecosystems and evolutionary processes.

For example, prayer animal release is a practice that started in the fifth or sixth century in some sects of Buddhism.

local species and contribute to the local extinction of native wildlife.

Capturing animals nearby has downsides, too. It can diminish local populations, since many die travelling to the release ceremony. The genetic diversity of these local populations in turn decreases, reducing the population's ability to survive.

Influence of politics

Politically motivated cam-

animals of capitalism" due to their fondness for grain.

The extermination campaign ended up decimating the sparrow population and damaging the entire ecosystem. With sparrows no longer hunting and eating insects, crop pests such as locusts thrived, leading to crop destruction and famine.

In the United States, racial politics may be shaping evolutionary processes in wildlife. For instance, American highways traverse cities according to political agendas and have often dismantled poor neighbourhoods of colour to make way for multi-lane thoroughfares.

These highways can change how animals are able to disperse and commingle. For example, they prevent bobcats and coyotes from travelling throughout Los Angeles, leading to similar patterns of population differentiation as seen in fire salamanders in Spain.

Wildlife during and after war

Human religious and political agendas often lead to armed conflict. Wars are known to dramatically alter the environment, as seen in current conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine.

While documenting evolutionary changes to urban wildlife is secondary to keeping people safe during wartime, a handful of studies on wildlife have come out of active war zones. For example, the current Russia-Ukraine war affected the migration of greater spotted eagles.

They made large diversions around the active war zone, arriving later than usual at their breeding grounds. The longer route increased the energy the eagles used during migration and likely influenced their fitness during breeding.

Wars limit access to resources for people living in active war zones. The lack of energy to heat homes in Ukraine during the winter has led urban residents to harvest wood from nearby forests.

This harvesting will have long-term consequences on for-

est dynamics, likely altering future evolutionary potential.

A similar example is famine that occurred during the Democratic Republic of Congo's civil wars (1996-1997, 1998-2003) and led to an increase in bushmeat consumption.

This wildlife hunting is known to reduce primate population sizes, making them more susceptible to local extinction.

Even after war, landscapes experience consequences.

For example, the demilitarized zone between North Korea and South Korea is a 250 km barrier, established in 1953, separating the two countries.

Heavily fortified with razor wire and landmines, the demilitarized zone has become a de facto nature sanctuary supporting thousands of species, including dozens of endangered species.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War led to the establishment of the European Green Belt, which runs along the same path as the Iron Curtain. This protected ecological network is over 12,500 km long, allowing wildlife to move freely across 24 countries in Europe. Like the Korean DMZ, the European Green Belt allows for wildlife to move, breed and exchange genes, despite political boundaries.

Politics has removed human influence from these spaces, allowing them to be a safe haven for wildlife.

While researchers have documented a number of examples of wildlife evolving in response to human history and cultural practices, there's plenty more to uncover.

Cultures differ around the world, meaning each city has its own set of variables that shape the evolutionary processes of wildlife.

Understanding how these human cultural practices shape evolutionary patterns will allow people to better design cities that support both humans and the wildlife that call these places home. (The Conversation)



each other and unable to pass genes back and forth.

In a process that scientists call genetic drift, over time salamanders on the two sides became genetically distinct - evidence of the two populations evolving independently.

Imagine dumping out a handful of M&Ms. Just by chance, some colours might be over-represented and others might

Practitioners who strive to cause no harm to any living creature release captive animals, which benefits the animal and is meant to improve the karma of the person who released it.

However, these animals are often captured from the wild or come from the pet trade, thereby introducing non-native wildlife into the urban ecosystem. Non-natives may compete with

paigns have shaped wildlife in various ways.

Starting in 1958, for instance, the Chinese Communist Party led a movement to eliminate four species that were considered pests: rats, flies, mosquitoes and sparrows.

While the first three are commonly considered pests around the world, sparrows made the list because they were "public

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, July 6, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

A visionary and productive year awaits you. The favorable alignment of Venus and Saturn brings discipline to your creative and romantic pursuits. You'll set ambitious goals and pursue them with practical steps, leading to impressive results. You'll experience growth in your profession—whether through a promotion, new job, or successful business expansion. Work-related travel will prove fruitful, and new associations with influential people will open doors for future progress. A friend may unexpectedly help you navigate a difficult phase. The atmosphere at the workplace will be positive. Support from colleagues and seniors will make your tasks easier. Your romantic life will be fulfilling—those in relationships will enjoy harmony, while singles could find themselves swept into a passionate new bond. Financially, things will remain strong, with steady income and rising social stature.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You are likely to swing to extremes in this period, sometimes happy, celebratory and at other times heavy, serious and even low. Professional situations and personal relations are sensitive and tend to go through ups and downs. Finances and material effects need to be evaluated; do not make investments or speculate heavily. This would be the right time to concentrate on your career prospects and professional skills. A healthy body holds a healthy and positive mind—work towards this.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) The planetary configuration brings to the fore activities related to communications, competition and examinations. You feel touchy and sensitive but would be more accommodating and compassionate in relationships. You would create a work of art in your field of activity. This brings success and good fortune at work and opens new horizons for expansion. This is the right time to participate in current events and share views, ideas and feelings with people around you. Sports and physical activities keep you fit and energetic.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This week highlights friendship, love, romance, spirituality and children in your life. There would be positive results from written and oral communication. Short trips, shopping, and journey are on your agenda. This is a good time to promote harmony and good relations with people around you. You are also dealing with issues that force you to rid yourself of guilt about under-performing, and to develop faith and trust in a larger more spiritual plan. It's time to let go of some of your fears that you are not doing enough; to develop more compassion and understanding of others, and to be humble, feeling content in the knowledge that you are putting in your best.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This week brings mixed results for you. After dealing with tough people and complicated issues you feel much stronger and clearer about your priorities. You are compassionate and generous with family, friends and relatives, drawing respect from them. It's also important to let go of some of your obsessions with rules, details, and fears of not doing things perfectly. The movement is towards a more balanced approach to dealing with practical, worldly matters and your own spiritual growth. Health needs extra care and old habits detrimental to your health need to be discarded.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Mixed results are indicated this week. If you feel especially angry, frustrated or restless, it would be great to find a little more work and things to do so that you can channel excess energy constructively. Your heart and head pull you in different directions when domestic and family related decisions are to be addressed. Communications and business associates from overseas bring good news and offer lucrative opportunities. A marriage proposal is worth considering. Children may be a stronger focus as well. Sponsoring or supporting other people would be rewarding. New or changed responsibilities around the home or towards family also figure at this time.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) This phase indicates income and gain from investments and speculations. This is a time of increased psychological understanding, intimacy, and perhaps accumulation of wealth if you manage your resources well. You

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) An intimate relationship develops or figures strongly in this period. Learning to share on a personal level brings you some measure of joy. Money matters make big headlines. A bigger drive for security is with you and re-organizing your home and domestic life comes into play. Other people's money may come your way or you might secure some real estate. You adopt new styles and invest in clothes, jewelry, perfumes and this brings color and glamour in your life. Your thoughts turn to children, pleasure and romance. You focus on having fun, enjoying sports and expressing yourself efficiently. You maintain a fitness routine and a healthy diet program.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) The planetary configuration brings mixed results for you. A partner's resources could have a significant impact on your home life. Finding joy in developing intimacy is featured, and this is a time where you develop and enhance your love on a deeper level. Work could be moving towards more research and development. The work you do could be supported by your spouse or other people's money in general, such as work in finance. You achieve success as you are brilliant and there is good fortune attending professional, personal and material aspects.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) This phase brings new associations and beginnings in work areas as new opportunities and changes may come about. You are likely to see benefits in the areas of finances, shared resources, personal transformation, research, investigation and emotional matters. An insurance settlement, tax rebate, could come your way, and this is an excellent time to work on financial planning and strategy. Financial gains may come through a partnership or there may be an increase in income. Benefit can come through jointly held resources, loans, or taxes. You need to be aware of the areas that could add value.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You would enjoy making things that are beautiful and you succeed in areas that require an aesthetic sense as well as technical ability. You would compromise and adjust and take a softer approach while dealing with people at work and home. It's a passionate time, although you are unlikely to be displaying a whole lot of self-discipline. This is a time when you could get a mortgage or other property and home-related financial backing. You would get serious about home, family, and domestic concerns. Health food, yoga and meditation would help to overcome from health problems.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) The ability to build up financial and monetary pursuits and good returns from overseas business are on the cards. Sharing your interests and communication with your loved one may be especially appealing to you. Family obligations may get in the way of your experience of pleasure and of the achievement of your personal goals. There may be some emotional distancing as well in your home. Your current living conditions may feel restrictive, limiting, too small or cramped (physically and/or emotionally). Delays and slowdowns may be experienced in the areas of health, mobility, and career.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This period brings wisdom, knowledge and creativity in your behavior and cooperation and harmony in personal relationships. Your drive for personal freedom and insistence on your rights is pressing, and a confrontation in which you have to stand up for yourself is likely. You certainly don't like to follow orders. Do your best to avoid impulsive decision-making that is built upon your desire to be a free spirit. You may recognize talents that you never knew you had, and this can be a sudden, exciting discovery. A health program finds favour with you.

Rise of pronatalism

In some parts of Russia, schoolgirls who become pregnant are being paid more than 100,000 roubles (nearly £900) for giving birth and raising their babies.

This new measure, introduced in the past few months across ten regions, is part of Russia's new demographic strategy, widening the policy adopted in March 2025 which only applied to adult women. It is designed to address the dramatic decline in the country's birthrate. In 2023 the number of births in Russia per woman was 1.41 - substantially below 2.05, which is the level required to maintain a population at its current size.

Paying teenage girls to have babies while they are still in school is controversial in Russia. According to a recent survey by the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre, 43% of Russians approve of the policy, while 40% are opposed to it.

But it indicates the high priority that the state places on increasing the number of children being born.

Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, regards a large population as one of the markers of a flourishing great power, along with control over a vast (and growing) territory and a powerful military.

Paradoxically, though, his efforts to increase the physical size of Russia by attacking Ukraine and illegally annexing its territory have also been disastrous in terms of shrinking Russia's population.

The number of Russian soldiers killed in the war has reached 250,000 by some estimates, while the war sparked an exodus of hundreds of thousands of some of the most highly educated Russians.

Many of them are young men fleeing military service who could have been fathers to the next generation of Russian citizens.

But while Russia's demographic situation is extreme, declining birth rates are now a global trend. It is estimated that by 2050 more than three quarters of the world's countries will have such low fertility rates that they will not be able to sustain their populations.

Putin is not the only world leader to introduce policies designed to encourage women to have more babies. Viktor Orban's government in Hungary is offering a range of incentives, such as generous tax breaks and subsidised mortgages, to those who have three or more children.

Poland makes a monthly payment of 500 zloty (£101) per child to families with two or more children. But there's some evidence this has not prompted higher-income Polish women to have more children, as they might have to sacrifice higher earnings and career advancement.

In the United States, Donald Trump is proposing to pay women US\$5,000 (£3,682) to have a baby, tied to a wider Maga movement push, supported by Elon Musk and others, to encourage women to have larger families.

One country seeking to address population decline with policies, other than encouraging women to have more babies is Spain, which now allows an easier pathway to citizenship for migrants, including those who entered the country illegally.

Madrid's embrace of immigrants is being cred-

ited for its current economic boom.

But governments that adopt pronatalist policies tend to be concerned, not simply with increasing the total number of people living and working in their countries, but with encouraging certain kinds of people to reproduce. In other words, there is often an ideological dimension to these practices.

Incentives for pregnancy, childbirth and large families are typically targeted at those whom the state regards as its most desirable citizens.

These people may be desirable citizens due to their race, ethnicity, language, religion, sexual orientation or some other identity or combination of identities.

For instance, the Spanish bid to increase the population by increasing immigration offers mostly Spanish speakers from Catholic countries in Latin America jobs while opportunities to remain in, or move to, the country does appear to be extended to migrants from Africa.

Meanwhile, Hungary's incentives to families are only available to heterosexual couples who earn high incomes.

The emphasis on increasing the proportion of the most desirable citizens is why the Trump administration sees no contradiction in calling for more babies to be born in the US.

While ordering the arrest and deportation of hundreds of alleged illegal migrants, attempting to reverse the constitutional guarantee of US citizenship for anyone born in the country and even attempting to withdraw citizenship from some Americans.

The success or failure of governments and societies that promote pronatalism hinges on their ability to persuade people - and especially women - to embrace parenthood.

Along with financial incentives and other tangible rewards for having babies, some states offer praise and recognition for the mothers of large families.

Putin's reintroduction of the Stalin-era motherhood medal for women with ten or more children is one example. Sometimes the recognition comes from society, such as the current American fascination with "trad wives" - women who become social media influencers by turning their backs on careers in favour of raising large numbers of children and living socially conservative lifestyles.

Russia's parliament passed a law in 2024 to ban the promotion of childlessness, or "child-free propaganda". This legislation joins other measures such as restrictions on abortions in private clinics, together with public condemnation of women who choose to study at university and pursue careers rather than prioritise marriage and child-rearing.

The world's most prosperous states would be embracing immigration if pronatalist policies were driven solely by the need to ensure a sufficient workforce to support the economy and society.

Instead, these attempts are often bound up with efforts to restrict or dictate the choices that citizens - and especially women - make about their personal lives, and to create a population dominated by the types of the people they favour.

(The Conversation)

"Happiness is nothing more than good health and a bad memory."

—Albert Schweitzer

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Quotas in Courts

FOR over three quarters of a century, India's elites managed to maintain a stranglehold over the bureaucracy. Very few from the disadvantaged segments of the 1.40 billion population could get into positions of power, other than in politics, where selfish men rule the roost. They have no sense of commitment to the causes of the underlings. By contrast, the orders by Chief Justice of India, Justice BR Gavai, to grant reservations in staff recruitments in the apex court to SCs, STs, BCs, physically challenged persons, ex-Jawans etc is seen as a landmark reform. Appointed to the post in May, his term will last no more than five months. Yet, he took upon himself the task of ensuring inclusiveness in the highest court.

Notably, Gavai happens to be the second Dalit, out of 51 Chief Justices that served the country since Independence; the former being Justice K Balakrishnan, who too had a short stint. The Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes have been given reservations in government jobs from the very start, thanks to insistence from BR Ambedkar, while BCs were entitled to this after implementation of the Mandal Commission report some 35 years ago. Yet, in a principal establishment like the Supreme Court, its implementation was delayed for so long. Indian society is deeply divided on the basis of religion, caste and much else. Elite segments appropriate much of the governmental benefits including jobs, partly by virtue of their educational advancement and partly through the stranglehold they maintain on the governance system. This is true not only of government jobs but also of those in principal establishments like the judiciary, the universities etc. Reservations ensured small segments of the disadvantaged groups to get into the administrative systems. In politics, however, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who himself hails from a disadvantaged social segment, runs the nation and another such in the form of Droupadi Murmu heads the nation as its President. The power to govern, which was once the privilege of Brahmins and previously the Kshatriyas in the form of kings, is today open to all. The same spirit however did not percolate down. Gross discriminations continue in the administrative mechanisms.

In a democracy, ensuring justice to one and all should be the prime objective of a governance system. In India, however, this has not been the case. Vested interests hold sway over the system by virtue of their social strengths. The fact that the tribal communities in India, or the Dalits for that matter, failed to significantly progress in the nearly 80 years of self-rule, is a shame on democracy itself. Prime Minister Narendra Modi showed only marginal interest in such matters also as his hands are tied by the RSS ideology. While Modi dropped reforms like a hot potato, Justice Gavai, with his Ambedkarite credentials, took it a step forward with abundant courage. The affirmative action by CJI Gavai may have far-reaching effects, unless a future CJI seeks to stall the process.

Letters to the Editor

The street is not a marketplace

The special article, "When Defiance Becomes Dishonesty: Standing with Law: Not Lawlessness" (ST July 4, 2025) by Lyzander E Sohkhlet is profound and timely, especially in an era where the line between principled defiance and opportunistic lawlessness is often blurred. This piece is a structured reflection on why one should stand with the law, even when defiance masquerades as virtue. Firstly, the law is a moral compass, not just a rule book. The law, at its best, embodies collective moral reasoning and social contracts. Standing with it affirms a commitment to fairness, not just convenience. When defiance becomes dishonest — driven by self-interest or misinformation it erodes trust and invites chaos disguised as resistance.

Secondly, civil disobedience, like Gandhi's satyagraha, is rooted in transparency, sacrifice, and a higher ethical appeal which is called honest defiance. When rebellion is cloaked in lies, manipulation, or selective outrage, it ceases to be noble — it becomes corrosive and this is called dishonest defiance.

Thirdly, the law often protects those without voice or power. Undermining it under the guise of "free-

dom" can leave the marginalized defenceless. Without legal norms, might makes right — and history shows how quickly that leads to tyranny.

Fourthly, upholding the law even when inconvenient builds credibility and moral authority, especially in governance and diplomacy. Dishonest defiance may yield momentary applause but often leads to institutional decay and public cynicism. A Litmus Test: Is the defiance transparent, accountable and altruistic? If not, it is likely not resistance — it is opportunism.

Lyzander Sohkhlet is absolutely right in saying that, "The Government of Meghalaya, through representatives like Paul Lyngdoh and Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong, has taken concrete steps to resolve this issue with fairness. A legitimate vending zone has been created in the MUDA complex and other venues."

The Supreme Court in 1989 had rightly said "vendors do not have an absolute right to trade on public roads if it causes obstruction." The author is absolutely correct when he says, "This is not about targeting livelihoods. It is about restoring order. The vendors who have accepted relocation have shown maturity and respect for the law. Those who threaten officials and resist verification are not engaging in protest. They are

In the Twilight of Trust: The Rural Doctor & the Lost Faith of a Grateful Nation This Doctor's Day, We Remember You — A Tribute to Those Who Keep the Flame Burning in PHCs, CHCs

By Dr R. Pohsnem

"Happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain."

— Thomas Hardy, The Mayor of Casterbridge

Each year, as the country raises garlands and tributes on Doctor's Day, it does so perhaps unaware that, far from the limelight of ceremonial stages and floral speeches, the doctor who once stood closest to the people's hearts is now fading from their memory. The rural doctor — once revered not for his degrees but for his presence, his constancy, his companionship in suffering — now walks in the shadows of a health system grown indifferent.

In those quieter times, a doctor in the village was not a mere agent of medicine. He was woven into the grain of daily life, as steady as the monsoon, as familiar as the soil. His arrival at a doorstep, often at dusk or midnight, brought not just clinical hope but moral comfort. The poor saw in him not only treatment, but a form of assurance: that someone would stand with them in the face of society's indifference.

He was called upon without hesitation, with cries from courtyards and knocks upon tin doors. Sometimes he arrived soaked in rain, sometimes bone-tired from sleepless nights. But he came. Always. Not because he was compelled by policy, but because the work called him like prayer.

A Grave Beneath the Memory Tree

In the depths of my childhood stands a moment I can neither erase nor fully remember. My youngest sister lay burning with fever. We rushed her to the Primary Health Centre in our village. The diagnosis was vague — perhaps typhoid, perhaps malaria. We never knew for sure. What we did know was this: the doctors there, though limited in tools and training, offered all they had. Their hands moved swiftly, their eyes held sorrow, and their duty was never in question.

We trusted them without hesitation, without doubt. We surrendered to their healing hands because they were all we had — and in truth, we believed they were all we needed. In those days, referral was a distant concept. Higher hospitals were like faraway castles in clouds. The rural doctor was our last stop, our only thread of hope.

She passed away, quietly. Not because no one cared, but because no one beyond

could be reached. Her death carved a quiet hollow in our lives. But our trust in the rural doctor did not die with her. If anything, it deepened. Because we saw in their effort the limits, not of their will, but of a system that left them so cruelly alone.

And in our hearts, we carried not blame, but a sorrowful understanding. It was a grief shared with the very hands that had tried to save her.

A Profession Beyond Reach

Today, the path to becoming a doctor has grown ever steeper. While qualifying NEET is now a common threshold, what lies beyond it is often a mountain too high for children of farmers, daily wage workers, and those whose dreams have mud on their boots.

The boy who once ran barefoot to school through paddy fields must now race against coaching centre clocks in distant cities, where time is paid for in thousands. In our time, when the 12th exams were over, we returned to our villages — not to prepare for another test, but to help our parents in the fields, carry firewood, and live as sons and daughters of the soil while we waited for results with quiet hope. Today, even that pause is unaffordable. NEET preparation begins the very next morning, and the poor must somehow fund both hope and hunger.

Though admission is merit-based, the true barrier lies not in the entrance test, but in the unseen costs — the coaching, the distance, the forbidding fees demanded by private and even many state-run colleges. The dream remains, but only for those whose wallets match their will.

And the child of the village, whose hands have fed fields and healed wounds without name, watches from outside the gate. The boy who lost a sibling. The girl who helped deliver her sister's baby. They would have once walked with fire in their veins to serve the suffering.

But now, they are asked to carry purses heavier than dreams.

And so, medicine loses not just a few bright minds, but a generation of quiet healers — those whose empathy was lived, not learned. We speak of equity in healthcare, of inclusion and access. Yet the very soul that might have served the underserved

is denied entry before the first lecture begins. The corridors of medicine, once imagined as spaces of healing, now echo with absence. The village child, full of untought empathy and resolve, is left outside. A loss not only for them, but for us all.

So when we lament the absence of doctors in villages, let us first ask: who was allowed to become one?

The Cracks of Estrangement

In the vacuum, the relationship once built on faith now turns brittle. Doctors are transferred like files, known not by face but by designation. Villagers queue not to be heard, but to be moved along. Empathy, once the pulse of rural care, is drowned beneath protocol, referral, and fatigue.

In many rural health centres today, doctors appear for their shifts but remain distant. Overworked or transient, they are unable to offer continuity of care. There is no shared history with the patient, no personal knowledge of the family's struggle. As a result, the health system feels more mechanized than human. Trust weakens, and frustration brews.

Once unthinkable, violence against doctors now finds root in betrayal. But the betrayal is not personal. It is the breaking of an old promise: that the doctor was one of us, not above us. That his clinic was a place of listening, not just of prescriptions. It is a grief transformed into rage, born from the absence of the doctor who once knew their name, their pain, their story.

When Care Becomes Commerce

In the cities, medicine has donned new robes. Glass-walled hospitals rise like temples, but entry is priced. The poor stand at the gates, not with hope but with fear. Prescriptions multiply. Machines whirr. But the touch — that old, human reassurance — grows rare.

And even in government halls, the doctor bends under burden. Files pile. Supplies fall short. The patient becomes a number. The healer becomes a clerk. The sacredness that once adorned the profession grows thin.

The commercialisation of medicine has shifted its compass. It now turns toward convenience, lifestyle, and profit. Where once the doctor asked, "What ails you?" they are now asked, "What do you

pay?" In such a setting, the quiet dignity of rural care is drowned in marble halls.

And yet, somewhere between policy and aspiration, a curious wind has begun to stir. Investments are being weighed, and choices are being made — not loudly, but with decisive consequence. In some corners, the effort is toward towers and titles, where white coats parade through lecture halls. In others, there lingers a plea: that the old PHC walls be mended, their rooms lit, their beds not left cold.

There are whispers that some hands might be pulled away from the village bedside to polish institutional dreams. That the very lifeblood of primary care — its reach, its rhythm, its human presence — may quietly be thinned to staff distant monuments. And those who watch closely, who remember fevered nights and dusty courtyards, grow uneasy. As Hardy once captured in his silences, "There are things that the heart thinks of but dare not say."

The Road Back to Belonging

Yet all is not lost. If we look again to the village, we may still restore what slipped from our grasp.

Let scholarships bloom for those with stories in their eyes, not balance sheets in their pockets. Let us honour those who have stayed, served, and held hands through long nights. Let rural postings feel like planting, not punishment. And let home visits return — not as nostalgia, but as necessity. For what is healing, if not the act of being there?

Imagine the village boy who once sat weeping beside his dying sister becoming the very doctor he once awaited. Imagine him walking those same roads, entering those same homes, speaking the language of compassion that once comforted him. That is the restoration we must dream of.

Medicine is not just science of cells and systems; it is a quiet response to unseen suffering. The soul of Indian healthcare once lived in mud-swept lanes, where care arrived unbidden and doctors were kin.

Let the village no longer be a place where prayers go unanswered, but where healing walks quietly among its people. And if such a day comes, a child will remember not loss, but life — held gently by hands that knew both grief and mercy.

(The writer is Primary Care Practitioner, Meghalaya)

Redefining The Northeast Through Cooperatives

By Bagmita Borthakur & Bishaldeep Kakati

India's cooperative sector is undergoing a profound transformation, one that is as strategic as it is structural. Since the creation of the Ministry of Cooperation in July 2021 under Union Home Minister Amit Shah, cooperatives are no longer treated as vestiges of an older economic order; they are being recast as futuristic institutions rooted in participation, equity, and local entrepreneurship. The Ministry has swept aside the fragmented, paper-bound rules of the past and replaced them with a unified, digital ecosystem that empowers citizens from the panchayat outward. India celebrates International Cooperative Day on July 6, guided by the motto "Sahkar se Samridhi" (Prosperity through Cooperation).

The Union Ministry of Cooperatives has computerised 67,000 Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS), 43,000 of which now function as Common Service Centres delivering Aadhaar services, crop insurance verification and more. A real-time database tracks over 8 lakh cooperatives and 30 crore members, while cooperative-sector loan disbursements have risen fivefold, reaching ₹1.28 lakh crore. The government is also preparing to launch a cooperative taxi service and India's largest cooperative insurance company to strengthen the sector from within.

Cooperatives have moved beyond 'financial entities' to 'community-centric institutions'. This paradigm shift also has a profound human impact. Across India, more than 1.15 crore "Lakshpati Didi"s — women earning over ₹1 lakh a year — testify to the cooperative movement's potential to lift households beyond subsistence. For the women-led farming and artisanal economies of the Northeast, a formal cooperative architecture could unlock similar gains in income and autonomy. Already, cooperatives account for one-fifth of agricultural credit, over a third of fertiliser distribution, and 4.5% of GDP through dairy. By 2030, the sector is expected to generate more than 11 crore jobs. With IFFCO and Amul ranked first and second globally in 2024 and the UN declaring 2025 the International Year of Cooperatives, India's cooperative resurgence is gaining international momentum.

For the Northeast, this global spotlight offers a timely opportunity to lead with indigenous models, from bamboo collectives to dairy cooperatives. As Prime Minister Modi has said, "Cooperatives are not just any system, but a belief, a spirit... the changing face of the rural and agricultural economy." This spirit, scaled through digital infrastructure and grounded in local realities, now stands poised to redefine development in the Northeast.

These national reforms are more than statistics; they are levers of change for regions long left on the margins, nowhere more so than the Northeast, where cooperative presence has historically been sparse, credit access limited, and market linkages weak. The ministry's plan to establish two lakh new PACS, one in every panchayat, promises to reverse this. Back when Shah inaugurated the Gangtokh conclave, he captured a broader shift, stating, "Fifteen years ago, no one would have imagined cooperative dairy conclave being held in a Himalayan state." His observation reflects how far the cooperative ecosystem has travelled, and how central it is becoming to regional transformation. He emphasised that multipurpose PACS in the region are envisioned not just as credit institutions but as full-fledged rural enterprise hubs, integrating dairy, LPG, farmer-producer

organisations, retail, and digital access in a single village unit. This convergence of finance, infrastructure, and service delivery marks a shift from cooperatives as transactional units to institutions of participatory governance. Despite being rich in resources and talent, the Northeast had long remained at the periphery of India's cooperative vision and efforts had been put to change this scenario.

The impact is already visible on the ground. In Sikkim, smallholder dairy farmers now produce over two lakh litres of milk daily, a feat unimaginable a decade ago. At the heart of this change are women's cooperatives, which empower women as stakeholders, not just workers. Shah rightly noted, "There can be no greater means for women's empowerment than dairy."

Assam offers another example, with a cooperative legacy dating back to the Shillong Cooperative Town Bank in 1904. The state now has a presence of 9,000 cooperatives. Another popular cooperative model in Assam is Purabi Dairy, which supports rural livelihoods through fodder, healthcare, and training. It localises the Amul model while creating income-generating opportunities for farmers.

Moreover, urban cooperative success is exemplified by the Guwahati Refinery Employees' Cooperative Society (GRECS). Founded in 1961, GRECS now runs a petroleum outlet, clothing store, steel counter, and LPG distribution for over 5,000 customers, demonstrating how cooperatives can thrive in industrial settings and contribute to community welfare.

In Nagaland, MARCOFED reflects a growing commitment to cooperative governance. With focused support, the region's bamboo sector, already central to daily life, could evolve into formal bamboo cooperatives. This would not only generate jobs but also build global value chains rooted in sustainable practices.

However, challenges persist with the perception of cooperatives as mere government loan agencies remaining widespread, especially in remote areas. There is limited understanding that the essence of cooperation lies in contribution, not just consumption. Yet, the Northeast stands on the cusp of a cooperative resurgence. Its diverse agro-climatic zones, indigenous knowledge systems, and connectivity to cross-border economies position it to lead a model of cooperative-led, sustainable development. By scaling models like GRECS and Purabi, integrating bamboo and horticulture value chains, and ensuring PACS function as multi-service rural engines, the region can convert cooperation into capital, economic, social, and political benefits.

This vision aligns with India's Act East policy and the government recognising the Northeast as Ashoka-lakshmi, the eight forms of prosperity. As India eyes a \$5 trillion economy, the cooperative movement in the Northeast is more than a developmental strategy; it is a geopolitical opportunity.

In a region often viewed through the lens of deficit, cooperatives offer a vocabulary of dignity, participation, and potential. With the right policy push, cultural shift, and community ownership, the Northeast can move from being supported by the Centre to actively supporting it, powered by the strength of its cooperatives.

(Bagmita Borthakur is PhD Research Scholar, BITS Pilani & Bishaldeep Kakati is Advocate, Gauhati High Court)

breaking the law.

Let us be honest. The streets of Shillong cannot continue to function as informal marketplaces without endangering lives. The Government has tried dialogue. It is now enforcing the law. It is its right to do so. If public order collapses, the most vulnerable always suffer first. And if those enforcing the law are vilified, the rule of law becomes meaningless." Sohkhlet's last paragraph is a right note that speaks louder than words.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh
Via email

Rejoinder to Lyzander E Sohkhlet's article

To state that the current hawkers imbroglio at Khyn-dai Lad was being watched with growing concern by a bemused Shillong citizenry is to make an understatement. The narrative presented to the public so far has been rather one-sided. The popular story portrayed is that of a people's resistance against state sponsored atrocities against the livelihood of the poor; that the real enemy is the establishment (in this particular instance the Government, Shillong Municipal Board and the Police) that is using brute force against the interests of poor ordinary

people. What was slowly being built up through such narratives was a Marxist ideology of a typical class war in the offing with the poor being encouraged to even take up arms and resort to violence to defend their dignity and livelihood (that video of a hawk with an axe says it all). The expectation from certain quarters was perhaps for an armed uprising/revolution of sorts to happen. The word "bemused" is deliberately used above because a majority of people genuinely doubted if the story being presented was really the truth. Then as a ray of light and hope came Lyzander E Sohkhlet's Op Ed "When Defiance becomes Dishonesty: Standing with Law: Not Lawlessness" (ST July 4th 2025). It is an attempt to present the other side of the coin. It makes a rather convincing read. Let's try and see what it had to say.

I find the write up based on facts, logic and sheer down to earth commonsense, shorn of all ideological agendas and one that approaches the problem from the general public's perspective and interest rather than just the one-sided version by a few. So let's try and tick mark the sensible and logical issues the article highlights. It speaks of the lawless effects of unregulated street vending (i) That the Police, the SMB and the Govt are not agents of oppression but institutions

tasked with upholding order, safety and fairness in public spaces (ii) that when streets meant for everyone are hijacked by a few, the state has not only the right but the duty to act and ensure justice for all (iii) That a story of rehabilitation backed by viable alternatives; liberal rousseau allowances; and two thousand rupees for five months also exists, different from the narrative of victimhood being presented (iv) that romanticising "Defiance of the law" is not only irresponsible but downright dangerous (v) The poor do not benefit from chaos they suffer more from it (vi) The streets of Shillong cannot continue to function as informal markets without endangering lives (vii) The Govt is not the villain here. Instead it is the only institution STILL trying to hold things together (viii).

Thank you Lyzander! As citizens of this once beautiful walkable city, we have learned a lot from your practical and reasonable observations. We appreciate the courage of our educated young people who are not afraid to come out and speak their minds. I hope and wish your Op-Ed article acts as an encouragement for others of your ilk to follow your example. We sorely need such open debates for a healthy society.

I would like to end by making my own observations on the chaos, confusion

and downfall of a society that applies inappropriate solutions to its problems. I take recourse to history and cite the example of Kolkata. Upto the mid 1970s Kolkata or Calcutta was a "must visit destination" in SE Asia. It was a vibrant, dynamic society where genteel Bengalee culture, academics and fun co-existed cheek by jowl. Then came the CPI (Marxists) led Left Front Govt and in the span of 34 years of communist misrule Kolkata was completely destroyed. But they too started off with the noble intention of eradicating poverty and injustice from society. But instead of uplifting the poor they resorted to the Marxist strategy of bringing everybody else down to the level of the poor! It resulted in irreversible disaster. Today the same recipe for a catastrophe is being offered by some for the city of Shillong. It's up to the people of Shillong to decide what they want to be. Another failed Kolkata or to regain the fresh, carefree enjoyable walking spaces we once enjoyed as free citizens of this beautiful hill station.

Yours etc.,
Toki Blah,
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.

"Clouds symbolize the veils that shroud God."

— Honore de Balzac

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MEG - What is VPP's Proposal?

THAT educational administration in Meghalaya suffers from congenital disorders is a no brainer. The data released by the Government shows that Meghalaya has many more schools than are needed. These schools have been started on purely political compulsions and later found non-viable because they were poorly administered. Students moved to schools that are better run and these schools opened on a whim were left abandoned but because their names figure in the education department's list and were receiving regular grants in aid they continued to be funded despite not having enough students or having too few with more teachers. The comparative data between Meghalaya and other North Eastern states has shown that Meghalaya with a smaller population than Tripura has three times the number of schools (Tripura 4929 and Meghalaya 14,582). Manipur with a population close to that of Meghalaya has only 4,617 schools.

Other reasons plaguing education in Meghalaya are that one institutions features in three or more books of accounts of the Education Department. The Primary section has its own system of grants-in-aid, the middle and high school a different one and the higher secondary sections feature differently, thereby one educational institution gets multiplied at least three times in the books of accounts. This happens due to lack of clarity in grants disbursement and schools take advantage of this opacity to feature their institution as deserving of as many grants as are conceived by the central government. As of today Meghalaya has 206 schools receiving regular grants without having any students while 2,269 schools are running with less than 10 students even while teachers are regularly paid by the government. Then there are Deficit and Ad-hoc schools of which 18 have zero with enrolment and 1,141 have just one student enrolment. There are 30 schools under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan with no enrolment while 268 schools have less than 10 students. Among the fully funded government schools, 11 have zero students and 143 schools have less than 10 students. A cumulative data of the amount spent over the years in financing these schools with zero outcomes, would run into thousands of crores. Hence the MDA Government's attempt to streamline financing cannot be interpreted as an attempt to privatise education.

So the VPP has come down heavily on the MDA Government accusing it of privatising education to benefit only the haves and deprive the have-nots of education. What then is the VPP's proposal vis a vis the Meghalaya Education Grant (MEG) Policy? The Government had put this Policy up on public platforms and sought for public opinion up to May 31, 2025. It is not known if the VPP or any other stakeholder in education has given any suggestions to the Government for it to act upon. One danger that many perceive could wreck the education system in the state is to empower the School Managing Committee (SMC) to appoint teachers and to manage the administrative affairs of educational institutions. In villages where members of the SMC are near illiterate, how are they expected to take judicious decisions to benefit the educational institution? This and the MEG requires serious public debate.

Ri Hynniewtrep: A Fake History

By Bhogtaram Mawroh

In this day and age of conspiracy theories and alternative histories, sometimes supported by a state to further its own propaganda, deciphering the truth can sometimes become difficult, though not impossible. Therefore, my disclosure upfront is that the alternative history I am going to describe here is purely fictional. The attempt here is to use this fake story as a comparative tool to help us understand our own biases and how to engage with the world with our place in it. So, with this disclaimer, let's dive in and explore what could have been.

Let's assume that South Asia, today made up of countries like India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Bhutan, comprise numerous independent political entities. In the northeastern part of this region lies the Kingdom of Ri Hynniewtrep, where lived the Khasis, an Austroasiatic people who arrived in this region around 5000 years ago. Around 2000 years ago, the kingdom was in great turmoil because of invasions and foreign incursions. Around Lum Sohpetbneng, there was a sacred site where the Khasis performed their worship to remember their descent from heaven to earth at the time when the world was coming into existence. This was the place of pilgrimage for all Khasis from all over the kingdom. But around the first century CE, a powerful foreign power invaded them, desecrating the site and destroying the kingdom. The invasion forced some Khasis to flee the kingdom, and they settled in kingdoms along the Gangetic plains.

Once they arrived at these new locations, the Khasis went about assimilating themselves in the local Gangetic communities. They kept their religion but forgot their language and started speaking an Indo-Aryan language interspersed by few Khasi words. They intermarried with the local population and, in time, came to resemble the local population in their appearance, with the only distinguishing marker of their distinct identity being their religion. Apart from intermarriage conversions of non-Khasis to Niam Khasi also altered the genetic makeup. These Khasis now look Dkhar, spoke a non-Khasi language with religion being the only evidence of their connection to Ri Hynniewtrep.

In the meantime, not ev-

eryone left Ri Hynniewtrep. Many stayed back and rebuilt the kingdom and they also intermixed with the different groups who, from time to time, came to the kingdom. However, because their number was greater and the people coming in had to assimilate, they still very much looked like Khasis. This meant that their genetic identity remained strong and connected to their ancient homeland in South China and the different Austroasiatic groups in South East Asia. On the other hand, the genetic profile of the Khasis in the Gangetic plains had become similar to those of the Indo-Aryan connecting them to Central Asia instead, the original homeland of the latter. The people in Ri Hynniewtrep also continued to speak Khasi and follow the Khasi matrilineal system. But in terms of religion, they were getting influenced by a new religion from South West Asia, brought in by one of the invaders, the English, a few centuries ago. In time, a majority of these Khasis converted to Christianity, while there were few who held on to Niam Khasi, while few adopted other faiths like Islam. So, except for religion, the Khasis who stayed back in Ri Hynniewtrep were the same people who had arrived in South Asia 5000 years ago. However, except for religion, the Gangetic plain Khasis were no longer the people who arrived 5000 years ago, but resembled the people who arrived in the region 3500 years ago.

Then, around 100 years ago, a great war broke out between the different kingdoms in the Gangetic plains. One of the stronger kingdoms in the region used the Khasis as a scapegoat for their defeat in another war a few decades ago. They massacred a great number of Khasis, killing many in gas chambers. The war ended when one of the rival kingdoms dropped an atomic bomb, which killed many people prompting the surrender of their enemies. After the war, the new political elites wanted to decide the fate of the Khasis. They looked for a new home for them. After thinking for a while they sent the Gangetic Khasis to the kingdom Ri Hynniewtrep, since they traced their origin from this land although they had not been there for almost 2000 years. They decided, with-

out consulting the Khasis of Ri Hynniewtrep, to give more than half of the land of the kingdom to the new immigrants. This prompted the Ri Hynniewtrep Khasis to take up arms and fight against the new immigrants. However, the kingdoms of the Gangetic plains supported the immigrants with money and arms, seeing in the new kingdom a chance to extend their influence over the entire Northeast. The Ri Hynniewtrep Khasis suffered great losses—many died, invaders raped their women, and they lost their homes and lands. The new regime pushed them into small enclaves and subjected them to an apartheid regime under surveillance. Repeatedly, the Gangetic plains Khasis would invade these enclaves and kill scores of the Ri Hynniewtrep Khasis in the name of fighting terrorism. Still, the Ri Hynniewtrep Khasis continued to fight for their land and rights. The invaders would then besiege the entire area and continue the killings. In the meantime, the new immigrants bolstered their numbers by inviting people who considered themselves to be a follower of Niam Khasi to live in the new kingdom. Some of these were Khasis, who had left for kingdoms outside the Gangetic plains. But again, they resembled more the communities they were living with rather than the Ri Hynniewtrep Khasis. Many though were recent converts who wanted land. There was also a group who claimed that they were the lost tribe of the Khasis - Diko, and they arrived from the southern peninsula, the land of the Dravidians. They looked nothing like the Khasis from Ri Hynniewtrep or Gangetic plains, with the genetic history instead linking them to the people who built the Indus Valley civilization around the Indus River. These new immigrants settled in areas near the enclaves and the land taken from the Ri Hynniewtrep Khasis.

From time to time, the new kingdom would also fight the kingdoms of the Nagas, Mizos, Meiteis, Bodo, Tripuri, Karbis, Garo, who supported the rights of the Ri Hynniewtrep Khasis. But supported by the money and weapons from the kingdoms of the Gangetic plains, the new kingdom defeated them all. In fact, the new kingdom

even taunted these neighbouring kingdoms to settle the Ri Hynniewtrep Khasis in their own lands, since most of them had also converted to Christianity.

Archaeological evidence later revealed that the Khasis who had left around 2000 years ago belonged to the inhabitants of only one particular Raid, and the Niam Khasi version they followed was just one of the many that had been practiced by the Ri Hynniewtrep Khasis for thousands of years. They never represented the entire Ri Hynniewtrep Khasis.

The new kingdom Khasis, though they claim to be the true inheritors of the religious site of Lum Sohpetbneng, maintained close contacts with the Gangetic plains kingdoms who supplied money, weapons and new immigrants to settle in the land taken from Ri Hynniewtrep Khasis. They would compete in the football league based in the Gangetic plains and even took part in a cultural program called 'Gangetic Vision' which was meant only for people from the Gangetic plains. Though new Khasi immigrants were constantly coming to settle in the new kingdom, the Gangetic plain Khasis still made up most of the population and controlled most of the positions of power. In fact, they would look down on some new Khasi migrants because of their skin colour.

Then one fateful day, the Ri Hynniewtrep Khasis broke through the defences of the new kingdom and kidnapped some hostages in exchange for their own people who had been kidnapped by the regime. This was the opportunity the new kingdom was looking for. Using the massacre that took place during this attack as a pretext, they started bombing, starving and killing the Ri Hynniewtrep Khasis indiscriminately. In fact, the ministers of the new kingdom even boasted that they will wipe everyone out. And this is where the story ends and also continues.

I hope the readers have enjoyed this fictional history. I would like to reiterate that it is purely fictional and a product of imagination. Hopefully, this fake history will help us better understand who we are and what our place in the world is.

(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)

Grades, grief and growing up: The true cost of Modern Education

By Jaiaraj Chhetry

In classrooms across India, students are silently battling a crisis that rarely makes headlines. Education, once a path to enlightenment, is now a pressure cooker of expectations. The pursuit of ranks and perfection has replaced the joy of learning, and the consequences are devastating.

As a teacher in one of the schools of Tura, I witness this daily. A Class IX student recently scored 25 out of 30 in English Grammar—an objectively strong result. Yet she was devastated. Her parents, focused on rankings, dismissed her effort. Another parent demanded a new maths teacher—not to help the child understand better, but to chase a higher position.

Her disappointment wasn't about the marks—it was about not meeting expectations.

This obsession with grades and ranks is not just misguided—it's dangerous.

What Schools Aren't Teaching

Despite the evolving syllabi and digital tools, our classrooms lack the most essential lessons:

- Emotional resilience and mental health awareness
- Financial literacy and life planning
- Conflict resolution and communication skills
- Self-worth and identity



development We teach children how to solve equations, but not how to solve emotional crises.

Teachers are overburdened. Counsellors are scarce. And students are left to navigate a maze of pressure, often alone.

The Suicide Crisis: A Global and Local Tragedy

India's Alarming Reality According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB):

► 13,044 student suicides were reported in 2022—that's over 35 deaths every day.

► From 2013 to 2022, student suicides rose by 64%, totalling 1,03,961 lives lost.

► In Kota, Rajasthan, 29 student suicides were recorded in 2023 alone.

"These are not numbers. These are children who believed they had no way out."

Global Echoes

South Korea leads OECD nations in youth suicide rates due to academic pressure. In Japan, suicides spike at the start of the school year—linked to "School Refusal Syndrome". In Canada and the UK, exam seasons correlate with spikes in self-harm and hospitalizations.

The Global School-based Student Health Survey found academic stress and bullying as major triggers in over 90 countries.

Psychiatric Insights: What the Experts Say

Psychiatrists worldwide are sounding the alarm. A study in SAR Journal of Psychiatry and Neuroscience states: "If not properly managed, academic stress can result in anxiety, depression, burnout, and suicidal ideation." Another study from BMC Psychiatry found that 73% of first-year university students reported high stress levels, with strong correlations to depression and anxiety.

"Academic stress is no longer just a performance issue—it's a public health concern."

Meghalaya: A Regional Wake-Up Call

Even in Meghalaya's serene hills, the crisis is real: ► In 2021, 226 suicides

were recorded, with nearly half involving individuals with middle school education or less.

► A 2022 study in Shillong found: 15.9% of college students had suicidal thoughts, 5.8% had attempted suicide

Recent news reports have further exposed the emotional toll:

► A 17-year-old girl from Jail Road Girls School in Shillong died by suicide in her classroom. She had excelled academically but was battling emotional distress due to family turmoil.

► A USTM student was found dead in his hostel room, reportedly overwhelmed by academic pressure.

► A 24-year-old engineering student from Shillong Polytechnic was discovered hanging in her hostel, prompting shock and grief across the campus.

"Behind every rank sheet is a child who may be silently suffering."

A System Obsessed With Rankings

Success today is narrowly defined. A child who scores well but doesn't top the class is often made to feel inadequate. We've replaced learning with comparison, and growth with competition: "We are raising students to chase ranks, not to chase meaning." **The Way Forward: Reforming the**

Classroom

To restore joy and purpose in education, we must act boldly:

► Integrate mental health education into every school curriculum

► Teach life skills like budgeting, emotional regulation, and career planning

► Train parents and teachers to support growth over perfection

► Ensure access to counsellors, especially in rural and underserved areas

"Education should teach children how to live—not just how to earn."

Final Verdict: Reform or Regret?

If we continue down this path, we risk creating generations who succeed on paper but suffer in silence. As someone who teaches in Tura, I see the light in students fade—not from failure, but from the weight of expectations they were never taught to carry.

"Education must liberate, not oppress."

We must build a system that nurtures thinkers, dreamers, and emotionally resilient individuals. The cost of ignoring this? Lives lost, voices silenced, futures compromised.

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5. India's silent epidemic: What's killing our students? – India Today

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7. SAR Journal of Psychiatry and Neuroscience

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9. Faridabad student suicide – The Tribune, Times of India

10. Economic Times: Kota's rising suicide cases

11. DW: Exam pressure fuels spike in student suicides

Letters to the Editor

Budget cuts shouldn't cut learning time

Editor,

As a student at NEHU, I feel compelled to speak out about a decision that's silently affecting many of us: the early closure of the university library. Recently, due to budget constraints, the administration has withdrawn security personnel and reduced the library's closing time from 8 PM to 5 PM. This change might seem minor on paper, but for students like me, it has created a serious academic disruption. Most of our classes end around 4:30 PM. That leaves just about half an hour—if that—to access the library. The evenings were the only time we could focus entirely on reading, research, or writing, without the demands of lectures and coursework. With the new schedule, we've effectively lost that essential space. What's even more disheartening is the lack of any effort by the administration to address the issue. No alternative arrangements, no evening access plans, and no consideration for how this affects our academic work.

A university library should be a cornerstone of student learning, not a casualty of budget cuts. We understand that financial challenges exist. But cutting off students from one of the most important academic resources on campus is not the answer. With the whole state of Meghalaya performing poorly in education, for us who had hopes and dreams it had just been taken away—just like that. The NEHU administration should really keep the library open no matter what the difficulties it

faces. Other universities had a better closing deadline of up to 10 pm and some are open 24/7. NEHU should really explore different solutions to this problem. For many of us, the library isn't just a building; it's a lifeline. I hope those in charge will listen to our concerns and restore extended hours. We are not asking for luxuries—we are simply asking for the space and time to study.

Yours etc.,
A Concerned Student
Name withheld on request
NEHU

Finance Department sleeping on files?

Editor,

Through the columns of your esteemed daily, I wish to express my deep concern and anxiety over the inordinate delay by the Finance Department (A/E), Government of Meghalaya, in sanctioning the gratuity and pension refunds that have already been cleared by the AG and the Shillong South Treasury Office and forwarded to the said department for necessary action since March, last.

It is disheartening to note that, even after a lapse of more than three months, no sanction or refund has been issued by the concerned department, despite sufficient documentary evidence being submitted to show that the pensioners have duly cleared all outstanding government loans. It seems that officials of that department are sleeping on the files. The prolonged delay not only undermines the rights of retired government servants but also disregards their years of dedicated and sincere service

to the state.

The pensioners, many of whom are aged and ailing, depend on their rightful dues for medical care and daily sustenance. Delays of this nature cause immense emotional and financial hardship. It is unfortunate that the very individuals who have served the government faithfully are now being neglected at such a critical stage in their lives.

I earnestly urge the concerned authorities in the Finance Department (A/E) to expedite the clearing process without any further delay and ensure that justice is done to those who have given their best in service to the government and the people of Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request
Via email

Shillong's Urgent Need for Visionary Urban Reforms

Editor,

The reports and editorials concerning relocation of hawkers, who are of course of desperate, shifted as they are in a place where they would rather not be. The question of livelihood versus development has always been a politically nuanced one.

While one can commend the Government's recent order to relocate hawkers and acknowledge efforts like the clean-up of Wah Umkhrah (a welcome step toward reclaiming public spaces), these actions remain fragmented, slow-paced and too little too late. The broader urban policy lacks the transformative vision needed to address Shillong's existential crises: congestion, ecologi-

cal neglect, and eroding livability. Some observations are put forth below:

1. Superficial Greening & Eco-Technology Void - The Wah Umkhrah riverfront, though cleaner, is a token effort. There is no integrated plan for green spaces, urban forests, or eco-technology (e.g., solar-powered streetlights, rainwater harvesting). Cities like Gangtok mandate green roofs; why can't Shillong?

2. Traffic Paralysis & Absurd Infrastructure Delays - Peak-hour gridlock at Barik Point, Rhinoh Museum, and Laitumkhrah persist because flyovers remain unbuilt. Worse, no tunnelling options—proven in Alpine cities to connect hills faster while reducing pollution—are even considered. I may be less informed on geologically feasible options, I have seen it being done in Manali and Yamunotri.

3. Zero Sustainable Transport Policy - Taxis and private cars choke our roads. Where is the ring road? Where are pedestrian skywalks? Why no feasibility study for a monorail (like in China's Chongqing or Swiss Alps towns) or electric buses? Poor infrastructure has led to increase in self-driven vehicles, while in the west a mark of good city is a top-notch timely transport system.

Global Lessons, Local Failure: Indian Hill Stations - Darjeeling's pedestrian-only Mall Road and Shimla's heritage tram plan shame Shillong's inertia. I have seen poorer nations like Sri Lanka restore Kandy's lakefront with cycle paths; even Tajikistan's Dushanbe has Soviet-era tunnels easing congestion. Much talk is there about Alps/China these days. They build tunnels through mountains and

elevated monorails over valleys. Why can't Meghalaya?

Lewduh & Beyond: The Stakes - Lewduh's redevelopment must embed sustainability: waste recycling, green corridors, and multi-modal transit hubs. Without this, it risks becoming another concrete jungle.

Shillong's Lost Potential - Cities globally thrive by being walkable, green, and business-friendly. Here, pollution scares tourists, choked roads deter investors, and students flee for better-managed cities. If Kandy (Sri Lanka) and Leh (India) can prioritize pedestrian plazas and eco-restoration, why is Shillong—a city with far greater resources—trapped in chaos?

Can we see a Future-Ready Shillong by the public? by taking up say:

1. Tunneling/Flyover Studies for key pinch-points (e.g., Barik to Laitumkhrah).

2. Ring Road + Pedestrian Spine: Car-free zones in Police Bazar, linked to Wah Umkhrah's walkway.

3. Monorail/Ropeway Feasibility Report: Connect Nongthymmai-Laban-Polo Hills.

4. Mandate Green & Tech: Solar streetlights, vertical gardens, and restored urban streams.

5. Eco-Redevelopment: Integrate Lewduh with cycle lanes, EV charging, and waste-to-energy plants.

6. Create more safe and open spaces for citizens to engage and unwind

Without these, Shillong's "Scotland of the East" brand will collapse under its own decay. It is hoped that policymakers will adopt global best practices—not piecemeal populism by organising cherry blossoms and music festivals or Christmas lights

to take the public for a ride.

Yours etc.,
Dr Salvador Lyngdoh
Shillong

DC's order flagrantly violated

Editor,

This is to bring to public attention that the District Magistrate of East Khasi Hills, through an order dated June 27, 2025 issued under Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNSS), has prohibited the movement of heavily loaded motor vehicles and night super buses along Mc. Cabe Road. The directive was intended to safeguard public safety and protect both private and public property. Regrettably, the order remains largely unenforced in practice. On a daily basis—particularly during late-night and early morning hours—numerous heavy trucks and night buses continue to ply through the narrow stretch, often resulting in snapped telephone cables, damaged drainage structures, and serious risks to pedestrian and vehicular safety.

As a concerned resident of Mc. Cabe Road, I earnestly urge the District Administration to ensure strict implementation of the Magistrate's directive in the larger interest of public welfare.

Yours etc.,
D. Bhattacharjee
Shillong-1

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

"Courage is knowing what not to fear."

— Plato

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SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, JULY 9, 2025

Build-up in Bihar

BIHAR had earned a notoriety for lawlessness for decades. Along with Uttar Pradesh, it was in the forefront of the national crime graph. However, there has been some respite in recent years, thanks to the tough stand taken by Nitish Kumar as chief minister. This could also be the reason why Bihar did not figure prominently in the recent release of crime statistics by the National Crime Records Bureau. It has Uttar Pradesh still on top while Bihar stood at the 19th slot – a major improvement over the years. Against this backdrop, the shooting down of real estate businessman Gopal Khemka in capital Patna on Friday was an isolated incident. Prima facie, business rivalry is the reason for the killing at the hands of a hired gang. His son had been shot down seven years ago. The present murder assumes more seriousness as Khemka is one of the main financiers for the BJP and that Bihar is heading for assembly polls.

Bihar's crime rate remained very high during the term of Lalu Prasad Yadav and his wife Rabri Devi. Their party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), drew massive support from some social groups, whose ranks are filled with muscle-flexers. One of the first acts of Nitish Kumar after he grabbed power in the state was to round up criminal elements wholesale and dump them in jail. This had a salutary effect on the crime scenario for many years. Now, Kumar cohabits with Lalu's party and his family members, but perceptions are that he generally keeps crime under control. Problem with Nitish Kumar lies elsewhere. He has no vision to turn Bihar's fate from being a backward state to a progressive one. Kumar's key governance planks from the beginning were reaching Sadak (roads) and Pani (water) to all nooks and corners. He however failed to take matters further ahead.

Kumar famously had been having a long spell of enmity with Narendra Modi. However, Modi having established himself at the apex of power in Delhi since 2014, Kumar had to finally cosy up to him and eventually return to the NDA fold. Now, political compulsions for Modi are such that he cannot do without Kumar. The JDU gives BJP the numbers to govern the nation. This presented the best opportunity for Kumar to speed up the state's progress as his party nominees are also ministers handling major portfolios in the NDA government at the Centre. Kumar can even draw a line and make Modi dance on it. For Bihar, after many years, this presented a great opportunity. Question however is, does Kumar have the grit and determination to shape the destiny of Bihar in better ways. To reassure his continued rule he is now promising 35 per cent reservations for women if re-elected to power. Kumar has shown a tendency to change colours like a chameleon. Where he stands next to remain in power is unpredictable though.

Remembering "Uncle Neil"

By Deepa Majumdar

Winter 2024-25 has felt bleak ... right from the start. Not because of the snow. If anything, it is cozy to be warm and snug indoors – with steaming food and endless cups of tea. Snow-bound weather encourages contemplation, bestowing the deep solitude we need to return to the still point within ourselves. So, why this bleakness? Not because of the erratic weather. Yes, climate change is here – with the weather seesawing from sub-zero to abnormally warm temperatures that have confused even our wildlife. Faithful migrants, the Canada Geese usually fly south in winter – but not this time. Just this morning, I saw a few waddling on the icy pond outside my window – as if skating. No, Mother Nature is not to blame for this unrelenting bleakness. Donald Trump is. Anticipating his vengeance, cruel deportations, and reversals of social justice, we have felt sad since the start of winter. Mr. Trump and his MAGA acolytes are solely to blame for our misery.

For me, the panacea lay, not in politics, or activism, but in the arts – specifically music, which Swami Vivekananda singled out as the greatest of all arts. But music, like beauty, is mercurial. It can express the full range of human moods and moral states. Thus, it is not music per se, but a specific type of music that comes with the power of healing. What I craved was Christmas music. With the snow outside and my glowing Christmas tree inside, all I needed was Christmas music. Not the produced-manufactured, money-making type that leaves you cold, but soulful songs delivered in soulful voices. This, I discovered, in the fabled Shillong Chamber Choir (SCC), one of my two favorite groups, the other being Cape Town Youth Choir. Yes, I listened non-stop to SCC – especially their Christmas Carols and hymns. If their association with Shillong filled my heart with pride and joy, their sincere piety completed my felicity. When I heard Ibarisha sing about the night divine – the night felt divine. I have never met any SCC member in person. But after listening to them non-stop, over several days, I felt I knew them. I grew fond of them – but sad that I had not watched them grow up.

Yet, more than the SCC members, it was their mentor and inspiration – Neil Nongkynrih, or "Uncle Neil" as the kids called him – that I longed to meet. An impossible wish, given his untimely death on Jan 5, 2022. But longings are what they are. They do not necessarily

follow the rules of rationality or realism. It was as if "Uncle Neil" was calling me from the other side (the afterlife) – urging me to remember him. I fulfilled my longing by watching several YouTube vlogs about his illustrious life. What I found would be familiar to anyone who knew him and loved him.

I discovered a person who combined in himself, both a child and an adult. We each have an inner child – often a wounded one, which we are too insecure to express. "Uncle Neil" seemed to know how to switch back and forth from child to adult. A gifted storyteller, he was pure magic to children. He wanted children to be themselves and to blossom. Like a master gardener, he knew how to make his child-flowers blossom. The secret to this, he knew, was the feeling of security. Children blossom naturally when they feel secure.

An unusual person, with in-depth understanding of the nature and purpose of talent – he seemed to understand that all talents come from God, who bestows these gifts, for the sole purpose of serving humanity. This means God can remove a talent as easily as He grants one – often giving talents to those who have suffered – as gift and compensation.

Philosophers have always distinguished talents from moral virtues. For Aristotle, the intellectual virtues (which could be interpreted as talents) are acquired through teaching, whereas moral virtues are acquired by habit. This means the two types of virtues are entirely separate – like parallel lines that never meet. Indeed, talented people can be scoundrels. Conversely, morally great saints and sages can be devoid of talents. So how does one connect, or at least coordinate moral with intellectual virtues?

Given his extraordinary power of faith, "Uncle Neil" – it seemed to me – had discovered multiple ways of coordinating the parallel lines of talent and moral virtue. First, he understood that we do not own our talents – a truism that compels us to be humble before God who is the Source of all talents – serving Him by serving humanity through talent. In this age of vulture capitalism, "Uncle Neil" understood the special susceptibility and risk of commercialization that plague the arts – the trenchant claw of materialism and inordinate worldliness (through love of name, fame, and money) that can pollute the arts – especially music. By insisting

on humility – a virtue often missing altogether in musical maestros – he infused moral virtue into the delivery of music. Indeed, the listener can hear humility in the voice of the SCC singer. Moreover, the choir (like the orchestra) teaches us to subordinate the "I" before the "we," for the sake of the collective good – invaluable lessons in humility and unselfishness for all walks of life.

I share "Uncle Neil's" dislike of child stars, while recognizing that it is not their fault, but that of their over-zealous parents, who sell their children for the sake of name, fame, and money. If I had to name a musical antipode to SCC, I would point to Taylor Swift. It is not Swift herself I object to, but her capitalistic approach to music. The will-to-sell is so pervasive that it destroys the arts with greed for name, fame, power, and money. By insisting on humility, and surrender before God, "Uncle Neil" and the youthful SCC members protected themselves from the poison of worldliness that consumes so many gifted artists.

Second, "Uncle Neil" coordinated talent with moral virtue, by letting go of personal ambition – instead letting the stellar career of SCC unfold naturally, following its own God-given trajectory. Young though he was, he was faith-laden enough to understand that when God gives us talents, He also takes care of the careers we need to express these talents.

Third, he coordinated talent with moral virtue, by understanding that music must be delivered with purity of heart. Hence this injunction for Ibarisha – whether you sing for one person or many, you must sing with the same quality – a maxim that meets all the requirements of karma yoga – thus sublimating, altogether, the temptations of capitalistic performances.

Fourth, "Uncle Neil" coordinated talent with moral virtue by healing a state torn apart by violence – with music. Dreaming of replacing the sounds of guns, with those of music in troubled Meghalaya – he fulfilled this lofty aspiration, at least to an extent.

Finally, he coordinated talent with moral virtue, by comingling his musical gifts with extraordinary humanitarianism – especially towards the poor, and the specially abled. Not only a gifted musician, "Uncle Neil" was also a rare mentor and teacher, who combined humanitarianism with tutelage, raising the SCC kids as his own. This was perhaps

his foremost gift and calling – something that gave him the most meaning in his life. Other Indians have marveled at the cohesion of the SCC choir members. The secret to their unity and cooperation, lay, not just in their shared religion, ethnicity, language, or even their shared love for music – but in their shared upbringing – above all, in the mentor they shared. Like a fierce mother, "Uncle Neil" watched over them like a hawk – nurturing not just their musical talent, but their character, confidence, and overall wellbeing. This kind of enriching kinship between mentor and mentee is well-nigh impossible in the famous music schools of the west, where this sacred relationship between mentor and mentee is poisoned by utilitarianism, ambition, cold professionalism, and an undue, often inappropriate sense of "equality" – stemming, not from wisdom, or humility, but from incapacity for true moral leadership, inordinate individuality, and mistrust. Thanks to his inspiring mentorship, the SCC was able to perform a post-colonial miracle – cross the impasse between west and east by combining western music with Indian genres – a fusion that would have been impossible in my youth.

After several years in the glamorous west, "Uncle Neil" left to return "home" to Meghalaya – because he had a home to return to. Many Indians, especially those with memories of abuse, have no home to return to. To the Dalit, the Muslim, and many women, the west is a refuge from the horrors of everyday India. They can never call India "home." But "Uncle Neil" had a "home" to return to – not just because he was somewhat privileged, but because of his uniquely affectionate nature. Yet, he seemed tormented. Like many believers and persons of faith, "Uncle Neil's" interior life was perhaps tormented by what St. John of the Cross called the "dark night of the soul." But given his divine longing, this torment was perhaps an impetus to his inner growth. One cannot help but be moved by how much he accomplished within a short lifespan. Although young, he understood that he did not have much time left on earth. Towards the end he seemed to be in a rush. Indeed, what he accomplished was extraordinary. May he rest in peace and may peace come to his grieving family, especially his mother.

Today as his family and the SCC remember "Uncle Neil" on his birthday, may he comfort them from wherever he rests in eternal peace.

The Comfort Crisis: Why Striving Feels Outdated

By Ellerine Diengdoh

Before we dive in, here's a quick disclaimer, which is also a confession. The observations that follow are not about all parents or all children. In fact, if I'm pointing a finger, several are pointing right back at me. This piece isn't a critique of your parenting. It's an exploration of a pattern I see in the world and in my own home. For the rest, let's get to the matter at hand.

I have been forced, by the biological fact of having a child myself, to conduct unwilling anthropological fieldwork. My research takes place at strange rituals known as 'birthday parties,' a gathering of small, expensive humans. At these events, I have seen things. Not "I see dead people" things, but arguably stranger and more horrifying.

I have witnessed an eloquent eight-year-old earnestly discussing his 'personal brand' and another asking my ten-year-old if she has a 'morning routine.' When one parent inquired if my daughter had her own YouTube channel, I calmly replied, "She'll get one right after I launch mine."

It is from this vantage point of profound confusion that I ask the question that seems to define our time, what, exactly, are we teaching our children to strive for?

What even is striving? Is it the opposite of arriving? So, if you've already arrived the moment you're born...in a climate-controlled car seat, wearing a cashmere onesie, does that mean your whole life is lived in reverse? This is the kind of thinking that keeps me awake at 3 am, agitated and profoundly stressed.

Striving, you see, implies a deficit, a hunger, a gap between what is and what could be. The modern child is born into the 'what could be.' They gestate in a womb of fulfilled desires, and they emerge, blinking, into a world where the only remaining frontier is tasting a new flavour of water. They are a solution to a problem that never existed. They are an answer in search of a question.

Children now experience soul-crushing depression because their birthday party wasn't 'aesthetically coherent' with their Pinterest board. Their greatest battle was a 24-hour social media detox where they 'truly connected with themselves,' before immediately posting about it online.

Our children today are not raised, they are curated. They are a project. We parents, the Enlightened Gladiators of the 21st Century, read the ingredients on a box of cereal and other packaged food, with the concentration of a bomb disposal expert, but then plug our children's brain directly into the unfiltered consciousness of the internet for six straight hours. It is like carefully washing a single organic lettuce leaf before feeding it to a goat, and then letting the goat watch television until its eyes fall out!

Our children's heroes are not people who overcame obstacles, achieved greatness through grit and dedication or artists and creators. Their heroes are curators. People who RE-ACT to things other people have made. They watch people watching people. Their entire sensory input is a hall of mirrors reflecting an infinitely receding void. They are a copy, of a copy, of a copy, of a blank piece of paper.

There is also a new parental anxiety. The fear of our child experiencing boredom. It is treated like a medical emergency, to be immediately

cured with an iPad or a supervised sensory activity.

Boredom, as I recall, was the forge. It was the vast, empty wilderness where you were forced to build something – a doll from rags, a tent from bedsheets, a bad poem, a personality. It was the engine of creativity, mostly because the alternative was staring at the wall until it drove you completely mad. Discomfort was the point... it was the grain of sand that forces the oyster to make a pearl. And I can't help but wonder what you get when you raise a generation of comfortable, un-irritated oysters. I suspect the answer is, just a pile of empty shells.

We were the last generation who knew what was what. We were raised on a diet of mud, neglect and thinly-veiled threats. We didn't have "playdates." We had unsupervised gang wars in a ditch. Our toys weren't toys. They were...things. Archaeological remnants of a forgotten civilisation – bottle caps were currency, bits of rusted iron became swords from space, old tyres were Formula 1 cars, a discarded plank was the bridge over a mighty river and a doll's head that was – well, it was a doll's head. It taught us about mortality. We built entire universes out of things the scientific community would nowadays call a 'bio-hazard'.

We, were raised by wolves, disguised as parents. We'd fight in the street, then come home and get the beating of our lives for embarrassing the family name in public. Dinner was simple – you ate the lumpy Dal or you starved quietly in your room (if you had one, if not, you had the great outdoors).

We were sent outside with one simple rule, don't come back until a bone is showing, and even then, think twice! We got a cut on Monday, stitches on Tuesday. A beating for both on Wednesday.

Discipline for us was a simple, elegant system based on physics. It was about the cause (you) and the effect (a ringing sensation in your ear). We were hit for answering back, which was called insolence. We were hit for not answering back, which was called stubbornness. There was the high crime of 'jlaw nguid' (a greedy stare), which could be triggered by merely looking at a biscuit for more than the prescribed two seconds. Then there were the unprompted demonstrations of power, delivered simply because an adult had entered the room, and felt the need to enforce hierarchy.

We were taught to be like furniture when visiting relatives or friends, and we were never in the same solar system as the adults. It was a simpler time.

Yet, we grew up. We survived. We learned resilience, humour and the fine art of ducking slippers.

Our children however, our precious, pre-approved, safety-certified children, what will they strive for, when everything is already theirs? The answer, I suspect, is the one thing we never saw coming.

They will wage a quiet war against the project we made of them, not to build something new, but to find the glorious void that existed before our ambition polished them into a mirror for our second chances, before our pride demanded they reflect a perfection we never achieved. Their legacy will not be an accomplishment, but an erasure.

And the first thing they will erase is our signature....

Letters to the Editor

Calling attention of Health & Family Welfare Department

Editor,
Apropos of the letter titled, "Timely information for NEET aspirants imperative" (ST June 28, 2025), I wholeheartedly agree with the sentiments expressed by the medical aspirant. I strongly believe that the Health and Family Welfare Department of the state should immediately invite applications for medical seats through government quota and subsequently publish the merit list at the earliest possible date.

Furthermore, it would be beneficial if the department could inform the probable total number of seats available under government sponsorship. This proactive step would enable candidates like myself to ascertain our status in the NEET 2025 ranking and make informed decisions about our future.

With timely information, we can decide whether to:

1. Wait for government seats this year
2. Explore private medical education options
3. Enroll in coaching classes for NEET 2026

I hope the Department takes immediate action to provide us with the necessary information, allowing us to plan our next steps accordingly.

Thank you for highlight-

ing this important issue.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Law misquoted, questions deserve answers

Editor,
Lynzander Sohkhlet's article from last week is amusing; in it, he claimed that letters by me and Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh, had struck emotional chords but distorted both the legal and factual landscape of the issue. He makes this extraordinary claim by citing section 10, subsection (1) of the 2014 Street Vendors Act, which states that every street vendor must operate strictly according to the conditions specified in their vending certificate. Anything outside of that framework is unlawful. He however, does not mention what the conditions of vending are that are mentioned in the Act to which he is referring to. Instead, he goes into the IPC code and an old judgment delivered in the late 1980s. It is to be remembered that in 2010 it was the Supreme Court of India which directed the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation to draft a bill on street vendors to protect them from harassment by police and civic authorities, demarcation of "vending zones" based on "traditional natural markets," proper representation of vendors and women in decision-making

bodies, and establishment of effective grievance redress and dispute resolution mechanism. Parliament subsequently drafted and passed the bill in 2014. What is also confusing about his claim is that there is actually no subsection (1) of section 10! Is he confused or did he just make up a new section?

There are two reasons for people to make false claims. First, they are not aware of the existence of additional documents or information on a particular issue and therefore their claims are based on incomplete knowledge. One can forgive such lapses since sometimes it's difficult to have all the information, especially if they are not in the public domain. The second, however, is a more serious one. We all know people who have a habit of lying in public just so that they can prove their point, even though they know they are misleading the public. They will distort information to suit their purpose. Such individuals can go to any extent to get what they want. So, I am trying to understand in which category Lynzander falls. There is a way to determine it.

I would like to ask Lynzander to cite provisions from the Street Vendors Act 2014 itself which talks about the conditions of vending and how the hawkers are violating it. It is important because the conditions will not come from outside the Act, but from within its provisions. This actually comes from Section 10 (no subsection 1) which he cited in his article

"Cancellation or suspension of certificate of vending: Where a street vendor who has been issued a certificate of vending under this Act commits breach of any of the conditions thereof or any other terms and conditions specified for the purpose of regulating street vending under this Act or any rules or schemes made thereunder" or in simple words the conditions of vending cannot come from outside the legal framework of the Act. So, is sitting on the footpaths of Khyndailand a violation of the Act? I think these questions are very important because he has accused me and Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh of distorting the law. I want to understand in what way? Then we will know whether he is misinformed or deliberately trying to mislead people.

Yours etc.,
Bhogtoram Mawroh,
Via email

Meghalaya Education Grant

Editor,
The reaction of VPP on Meghalaya Education Grant Proposal is well timed and thought provoking. In Meghalaya, most schools are under private management. The community church, linguistic minorities established these institutions and some institutions are over a hundred years old. The State Government grants recognition to these institutions and funds them.

The Government of Assam in 1957, introduced a system of maintenance of

grants known as "Deficit Grant-in-aid", with a view to extending the benefits of government prescribed pay scales to attract good quality teachers for providing quality education. The VPP rightly mentioned, "It is a known fact that the deficit schools and colleges in Meghalaya are the most significant contributors toward education."

The system inherited from the Assam government is still pursued with little modifications. The Government of Meghalaya from time to time assumed the entire financial liability to bring the salaries of the teaching and non-teaching staff at par with government teachers except for pension and medical benefits and the Pay Commissions always extended the revision of pay accordingly. Now the benefits of pension are also extended.

There was a moratorium on bringing more schools under the deficit system of grants-in-aid since 1989. On the other hand, teachers under Adhoc grants-in-aid system and non-Adhoc grants-in-aid system got recognition but get very low salary not to speak of allowances etc. The situation needs reviewing since there are huge disparities in the salary which has to be narrowed down. Up-gradation or uniformity of salaries is necessary. At the same time it is not possible to bring all institutions in one category.

The deficit system of Grants-in-aid which already formed a part of the system cannot be done away with the VPP rightly mentioned, "It is a known fact that the

deficit schools and colleges in Meghalaya are the most significant contributors towards education."

The name deficit grants may be changed with MEG but there will be Category I, II, III. MEG, it seems, intends to put a moratorium on filling up vacancies of institutions, but the government will definitely consider all relevant issues. At this transition time vacancies resulting from the retirement/resignation or otherwise of teaching and non-teaching staff being put on hold has created serious problems in enabling the delivery of proper education to students.

For instance, one institution which was brought under the deficit system in 1989, had only 12 teaching and non-teaching staff. Out of these three teaching staff retired and one non-teaching staff resigned. The institution's advertisement was kept in abeyance and the institution does not have its own resources to appoint staff. There are so many such situations arising out of withholding fresh advertisement for appointment against vacancies.

Therefore, the Government should look into these matters and the problems created due to retirement and resignation in the larger interest of education in the state.

Yours etc.,
Dr S K Chattopadhyay
Via email

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

“Nature’s far too subtle to repeat herself.”
— Paul Muni

The Shillong Times
Vol No LXVII No.328 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, JULY 10, 2025

Normalising Sexual Crimes

THERE was a time in tribal society when one unnatural death such as the murder of a man or woman would create a furor, followed by bitter condemnation, particularly at the place closest to where the murder occurred. Today such incidents have become commonplace and this should make us ask whether we have become part of the so-called mainstream society where such things happen all the time and conscience and emotions are therefore anaesthetized if not frozen.

Between May and June this year two grotesque murders were reported. One was that of a woman killed by her husband; the other is of a young woman whose throat was slit in broad daylight and in a public space by an obsessive lover. The latest report is of a step-father raping his 15-year old minor step-daughter to the point of impregnating her. Despite the presence of the State Commission for Women there is evidently no behavioural or attitudinal change in men. Nor are women able to take corrective steps to defend themselves from such neurotic lovers. Khasi society is not new to step-fathers sexually assaulting their step-daughters but these are hushed up because this is a society that calls itself “god-fearing and respectful of fellow humans (ri tip-briew, tip-Blei),” and no one wants that veil of respectability to be undraped. Society therefore considers each of these crimes as one-off incidents and moves on. What is a matter of concern is that there is no thriving woman’s organisation in the state capital to call out such crimes and seek justice for the victims. Such incidents should have activated the State Commission for Women to take suo-moto action by condemning the incidents through public statements, apart from showing concern for the family members of the deceased women and also enabling them to seek justice for those killed. Instead, there has only been a studied silence. It is learnt that the Government has not appointed members to the State Commission for Women which now has only a Chairperson. So why is the Government so slack and disinterested to empower this important agency created to safeguard women from all kinds of sexual crimes? Several years ago the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) had come up with damning statistics about Meghalaya being a state with the highest number of domestic violence cases. At the time some Rangbah Shnong when asked for their comments stated that these are unfounded allegations intended to defame the state. But those working in the State Commission for Women inform that there are several cases of violence – physical, emotional, adulterous relationships, abandonment by the husband/partner and more, every single day.

Those are only the women that have picked up courage to come to the Commission or to report incidents of sexual violence. There are many more cases in our villages where women dare not report crimes of violence, like marital rape for instance. Unless the State Commission for Women activates women’s organisations across the state to take responsible positions on crimes against women, such cases will grow in number. Time to activate the State Commission for Women!

Letters to the Editor

Abandoned by the system

Editor,
I write this letter as a deeply frustrated and helpless student – a victim of the complete failure of both the Indian Government and the Meghalaya State Government to safeguard the future of the very people they claim to serve.

On July 10, I have an important train to catch from Guwahati to attend my exams – and like countless others from Shillong, I must leave home on July 9, cross a state border, and reach Guwahati just because Shillong has no railway station of its own. This is not a new problem. It is a long-standing issue that none of our governments – state nor central – have cared to address. Even today, we continue to pay the price for this negligence. Why must students from Shillong suffer due to this gaping infrastructural failure?

Now, as Bharat Bandh disrupts transport, Meghalaya taxi unions have declared they will not operate to Guwahati. This means students like me may miss their trains, their exams, and potentially lose a full academic year – all because governments have failed to make basic arrangements or reach understanding with unions in time. Why has no alternative transport plan been announced? Why no emergency measures?

To every politician who comes door-to-door during elections, offering promises of “service” – where are you now? Will you pay compensation for my academic loss? Will you open your VIP convoys – funded by our taxes – to help students reach Guwahati safely? Will any of you stand with us now, when your inaction costs us our future?

This isn’t just an inconvenience. It is disruption, abandonment, and apathy by elected leaders who owe us accountability. If any of you have even a shred of responsibility left, you should have intervened before the night of July 8, talked to the unions, and ensured the safe movement of public – at the very least, for students.

But why would you? You are rich. You don’t travel in shared taxis. You don’t need to worry about missing trains or exams. You lose nothing. We, the common people, the students, lose everything.

I say this with deep anger and pain – shame on all of you who let this happen. Your silence is louder than your promises. Your comfort is built on our struggles. You have failed us.

As deep as my anger stands today, so does my fear. I fully understand the consequences of speaking up, and while I desperately want to voice this pain, I am equally afraid to publish my name. Not because I have done anything wrong – but because those in power may not act to relieve public suffering, yet they will not hesitate to act against anyone who dares to hurt their ego.

I request the Editor to kindly withhold my name from publication. But I also urge you to include this paragraph, because it reflects a terrifying truth: students in Meghalaya and across India are not just feeling abandoned – they are afraid to even express themselves – a right that should be protected in any democracy.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Plea to revive education in our State
Editor,
Through these columns, I wish to draw attention to the alarming state of the education system that continues to plague Meghalaya. It’s a paradox that in a state celebrated for its rich literary tradition, cultural depth, and widespread enthusiasm for learning, the actual infrastructure and quality of education remains deeply inadequate. Poorly maintained schools, underpaid teachers, and the lack of basic facilities such as libraries and laboratories do not reflect the aspirations of a state that once ambitiously declared its vision to become an educational hub of India.

While our youth strive towards higher education and professional excellence, many are held back by systemic neglect and bureaucratic apathy. It’s high time the Government and concerned authorities moved beyond token gestures and instead prioritized meaningful, sustainable educational reform. Improved infrastructure, teacher training, curriculum modernization, and fair access to resources are essential if we are to truly honour the spirit of learning that Meghalaya proudly upholds.

It’s worth noting that Meghalaya ranked favourably in recent NITI Aayog reports, reflecting our potential for sustainable development. This further underscores the need, the opportunity, and the capability of transformative action.

I sincerely hope the authorities take note of the plight of students and commit to realising the promise once made, setting an example that with dedicated governance and right initiative, even low ranking states can rise and shine!

Yours etc.,
Devansh Agarwal,
Via email

Behdienkhlam is about the ancestors too

By H.H. Mohrmen

Generally, Behdienkhlam is described as a festival to “chase or rid off plague.” It is also said that the festival is connected with the agrarian culture of rice wetland cultivation. It also speaks about migration, as the festival is the time when people who are originally from the same raid congregated on the penultimate day to celebrate the joy of being together or the joy of homecoming. Yet Behdienkhlam, at least to the people who follow Niamtre of Jowai, is also about honouring the ancestors.

The people of Jowai will celebrate the Behdienkhlam festival this week. The four-day, three-night festival will begin on July 11 and culminate on July 14. But what the general population does not know is that for some clans, the celebration starts a few days before the 11th with the tradition of ancestor veneration.

The offering of ka Siang ka pha / ka siang ka phur during Behdienkhlam
Behdienkhlam is connected with the covenant between U Trekirod and the 7 Wasa when the creator and the created parted ways, when U Trekirod said to people of the seven huts that they would not be able to meet him in person, or that human eyes would not be able to see the Maker anymore, but the communication between the Creator and the created would only be through prayers and offerings.

U Trekirod, however, promised to visit humans and the earth once a year, and he would bring with him all those who had died. U Trekirod asked the leaders of humans what they would offer him when he made this annual visit. So Behdienkhlam festival is that offering and festivity that “u 7 Wasa” promised to offer to the Creator when he made those annual visits accompanied by the ancestors.

The “ka siang ka pha” offerings during Behdienkhlam are offered at the respective family’s fungblai simultaneously as the “ka niam tong chong” or “ka niam tong raid” commences. As the community celebrates Behdienkhlam, we also have to perform the ritual offering to the ancestors at our respective houses. (Rilang Lato)

To understand “ka siang ka pha,” one must also understand how Jowai was first settled or peopled. The earliest settlers of Jowai are signified by three factors: that the first clans have a household deity called ‘U Sniriang Ksiar,’ the family should also have a common home called “I fungblai or Kmai tung” (Mina Laloo), and the different households under the fungblai are called “ki trep ki skum.”

Most of the families offer “ka siang ka pha” to their ancestors during Behdienkhlam on “Pynsiñ,” the sixth day on the traditional calendar of the Pnar of Jaintia Hills. The offering has to be completed ‘chwa u kieh ka bom’ before the ‘khon rai’ start beating the drum to collect the ‘syumbid khnong,’ a log which is next in its status and honour to ‘u khnong blai.’

During Behdienkhlam, there are families who make the offerings one or two days before—the Passah of Panaliar on the fourth day, Hat, and Paswet Wahsynji on Khyllaw, the fifth day of the week. The Rngad clan also offers ancestor veneration on “Hat,” the fourth day as per the traditional calendar. If the family cannot offer “ka siang ka pha” during Behdienkhlam, then their ancestors return dissatisfied (“dei ksoh thadoh,”) and return to “Soorkep,” the abode of the spirit, with the feeling that something is amiss. (Rilang Lato)

While the offerings during Behdienkhlam are offered to all who died at a room called “rakut,” offerings for those who died “fap mynsoo” (accidental death) is not offered along with the others, but it is made at “dwar or pchem,” outside the house.

Criteria to be fulfilled for the offerings to be made
Requirement for the veneration to be offered – All members of the family within the fungblai must be in the pink of health. “I cheit I khiah” means all the members of the families who belong to or who are within the same “fungblai” should be healthy. No one should be unwell. If a member of the family is hospitalized, then the offering cannot be made.

“Ka siang ka pha” cannot be offered if any member of the family experiences “hapi lor,” i.e., premature death, and the ritual related to the placing of the bones in the “moo tylleih,” called “booh khonor,” is not completed. The family cannot offer ka siang ka pha if there is ‘hap khonor’ (premature birth) among any of the family members under the fungblai.

The veneration cannot be performed if there is a member of the family who died in the domain of the ‘Ryngkaw para’ or “Ka chyiñ chha chnong para,” where the different nature deities dwell or outside the domain of Raid Jowai. On such an occasion too, “ka siang ka pha” cannot be offered by the family. Only when the charred bones are interred in the clan’s ossuary can the family offer “ka siang ka pha.” “Mih blai / mih niangpyrchit / niang syiar” (when someone has measles / chickenpox etc.), then in such a situation, “ka siang ka pha” cannot be offered.

Families who have just had somebody die during the months before Behdienkhlam also do not perform the offerings, because they have just completed one during cremation.

How “ka siang ka pha” during Behdienkhlam is offered
The offering starts with a prayer led by “u Kñi,” or the maternal uncle of the clan under the fungblai. Then the offering is made by “ka kchu ka siang,” (the custodian of the “fungblai,”) and she will be assisted by “ki nongiarap.” The “kchu ka siang” and “ki nongiarap” have to be pure and clean. They should be “dei kynsai, dei pangrai” or “ki loh kynsai,” which means females who entered into marriage with a man as prescribed by tradition. “Ki loh kynsai” is when marriage is “ia biang rrap,” or the layers of relationship are perfect between the husband’s and wife’s clan. The offering cannot be made by a woman whose marriage is “dei lai paruid,” which means marrying someone who is like a paternal uncle.

The different plates and what they symbolize
The offering is made on bronze plates. There is no difference in the number of plates used by families when ‘ka siang’ is performed during Behdienkhlam and ‘ka siang rap’ or offering performed when a member of the family is cremated. During Behdienkhlam, the offering is made using brass plates about 12 inches in diameter, and traditionally, families offer 6 plates in total. Plate number 1 is for the ‘poi tpep poi tbar,’ also known as “kiwa seif ia u moottyileih u moo tymmoh,” (those who have reached the final destination of the soul, whose charred bones were kept in ‘ki tpep or tpar.’ These are ancestors who have ‘seif moottyileih moottyimoh’ – (established the clan’s ossuary). Plate number 2 is for the ancestors who have reached the stage called ‘pynchong ngiah,’ (a temporary resting place of the soul).

All the clans which ‘joh ka khong ka khri,’ (the primary clans of the Raid Jowai), have two segments or parts of the ‘tpep’ areas where the bones are kept. The two segments are ‘thaw pynchong ngiah’ and ‘poi tpep poi tpar.’ Clans which came later – ‘chong kynthap, chong kyndiam’ – do not necessarily have two segments in the tpep.

The third plate is for the ‘joh sati,’ (women who married only once or had only one husband). Plate number 4 is for the members of the family ‘lai paruid,’ (who married their uncles on the father’s side). Plate number 5 is meant for ‘khonor,’ (babies who died a premature death), and plate 6 is for ‘ki chongbro chongban,’ (people, mostly men, who worked with the family and were treated as one of their own).

There are families who offer another plate for ‘ki waboon walang,’ or the general ancestors who were not included in the six plates above. Another plate is an offering for ancestors who died an unnatural death – “ki tpep mynsoo,” and for them, it is performed outside the house. Then there are plates for ‘ki siang pa siang men’ – offerings made by children in honour of their departed father or their father’s mother.

Mandatory items to be offered are ‘ja’ (cooked rice), ‘dakha pati’ (a special kind of fish), betel nuts and pan leaf, and two types of bananas (not any kind of banana) known as ‘ladaw bamkhon’ and ‘ladam bamdoh.’ Other than that, families can include all kinds of seasonal fruits available in the market.

The ‘Siang Behdienkhlam’ is just a small part of the research on this important tradition, conducted by the writer with the support of the Chief Minister’s Research Grant 2024–25. According to Mina Laloo and Rilang Lato, it is the most important aspect of the festival and one that is deeply spiritual and fulfilling. Others who contributed to this study are Dawmanshuh Lamar, Wamnon Rngad, and her sister.

Bob’s Banter

By Robert Clements

Shout From the Mountaintop, Sir.!

At the BRICS Summit in Rio de Janeiro, our Prime Minister stood with the confidence of a man who believes the whole world is leaning in to listen. Chin high, chest puffed, he thundered for all the globe to hear, “The Global South is not being heard!”

Bravo, Sir! Clap! Clap! Clap! I nearly knocked over my coffee in patriotic excitement. Almost broke into a bhanga right there in front of my laptop in my New York apartment, till a raised eyebrow from my grandson made me pause. And then, as the applause faded in my mind, so did my enthusiasm. Not because the statement was wrong—it was, in fact, bang on. But because it reminded me of a simple truth: shouting louder doesn’t help if you’re shouting from the bottom of a pit.

You see, Sir, it’s not just about what we shout. It’s also about where we shout from.

When one hollers from the valley while the rest of the world has climbed to the mountaintop, the voice may travel no further than the ears of a sleepy cow or a distracted goat. Or worse, bounce back like an awkward echo, making it sound like we’re grumbling to ourselves. And let’s be honest, Sir, there’s been quite a bit of that lately—more grumbling than climbing.

Now let’s talk about this famous “Global South.” That’s us, by the way—India and her distant cousins in Asia, Africa, Latin America. The family reunion nobody really plans for, but which

that a school means teachers who teach, toilets that flush, and meals that nourish—not mid-day scams.

Climb out of our warped justice systems, where a woman must first prove her decency before her violator is asked about his crime. Where justice for the poor moves slower than snails while VIP cases gallop through like Olympic sprinters.

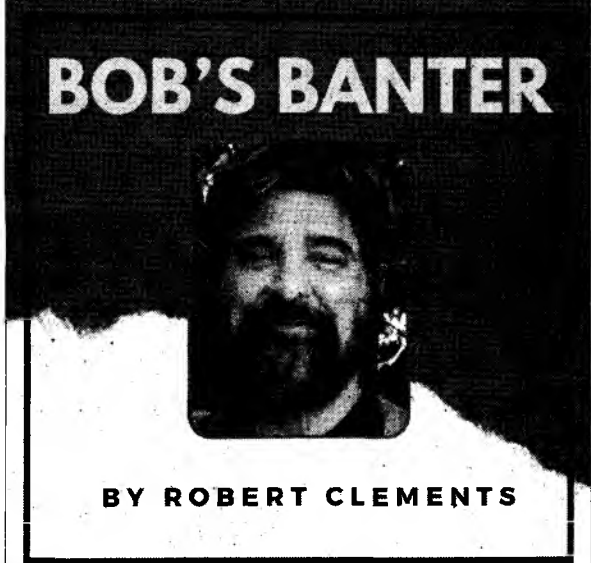
Climb towards truth—not the manufactured kind that’s convenient, but the real, raw, sometimes uncomfortable truth. A truth where journalists don’t vanish, authors aren’t banned, and truth-tellers aren’t trolled into silence. Where media isn’t just a chorus of nodding heads but brave voices asking hard questions.

Climb towards equality—not just for newspaper ads on Women’s Day or Twitter posts during Independence Day—but equality that reflects in every street, every court, every home. Where a woman can walk at midnight without being labelled “too bold” and a Dalit child can sit in the front row without being told to “know his place.”

Climb until freedom of expression isn’t a weekend sale offered on Independence Day but an everyday right that allows dissent, humour, satire—even the kind I write, Sir.

Climb till the words “Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas” are not hollow slogans, but lived experiences. Till a young girl in Bihar or a boy in Baghmara believes he doesn’t have to leave his country to live his dream.

Climb till our GDP isn’t



BY ROBERT CLEMENTS

everybody ends up attending with a slightly wrinkled kurta or a weathered batik shirt.

We are nations rich in culture, abundant in talent, and positively overflowing with potential. Our people are brilliant. Our soil fertile. Our minds sharp. But somewhere between potential and policy, we seem to stumble on the same old stones: corruption, casteism, patriarchy, polarisation, and power-hungry politicians who are more interested in selfies than in selfless service.

So yes, Mr. Prime Minister, the world isn’t listening—but not because they’re deaf. It’s because, quite often, we sound like we’re whining, not winning.

Imagine this: Someone on a peak, with strong institutions, real equality, robust infrastructure, and a proven human rights record shouts, “We have a vision!” The world perks up. Heads turn. Pens are uncapped.

Now imagine us in the valley, with dodgy data, gagged media, jailed comedians, and roads where cows walk more freely than women—shouting, “We’re not being heard!” It’s not that they’re ignoring us, Sir. It’s that we haven’t earned the elevation from which a voice becomes a vision.

Let’s not just shout. Let’s climb. Climb out of corruption—not by catching the poor postman accepting a Diwali envelope, but by cleaning the stench from the top floors of power, where horse trading takes place, and politicians are paid or blackmailed to cross floors.

Climb out of poverty—not with election-time jumbalas and ribbon-cutting selfies, but by building institutions that don’t vanish once the camera crew leaves. Let every child in a village know

just growing on paper, but visible in cleaner hospitals, safer trains, and air we can actually breathe.

Because when we finally reach that mountaintop—where dignity is not a privilege, where truth isn’t selectively curated, where justice doesn’t wear blindfolds only on certain days—then we won’t need to shout at all.

The world will turn and look. Not out of pity. Not with polite applause. But with genuine respect.

And when we speak then, from that higher ground—not with arrogance but with authenticity—the world will listen.

Because that’s how respect works. You earn it. Not by thunderous declarations in air-conditioned halls, but by patient, painful, honest climbing up slippery slopes of reform.

So yes, Mr. Prime Minister—by all means, shout. But please make sure we’ve actually reached the mountaintop first.

Otherwise, it’s just another rumble in the ravine. And honestly, all it does is startle the cows. And we really don’t want to do that, do we? They already have enough to deal with—from traffic to photo ops to political parties fighting over who loves them more.

So, climb Sir. Pull us up. And once you do, the shout won’t need a microphone. It’ll carry by itself—across oceans and summits, respected not just by allies but even by adversaries.

And when that day comes, I might even do a full bhanga—even with my two left feet...

If you would like to receive Bob’s Banter as a daily column in your WhatsApp everyday, do send your name and phone number to bob-banter@gmail.com

Reforms in education

Editor,
The editorial “MEG-What is VPP’s Proposal?” (ST July

Source: Ministry of Education, Government of India.
Note: P2 is Moderate effort, P3 is Low moderate effort, P4 is Low effort, P5

Reform, conduct a statewide audit of teacher deployment and qualification.
Introduce merit-based recruitment and mandatory

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

8 2025) made interesting reading. The editorial has rightly said “A cumulative data of the amount spent over years in financing these schools with zero outcomes, would run into thousands of crores. Hence the MDA Government’s attempt to streamline financing cannot be interpreted as an attempt to privatise education.” “If you think education is expensive, try ignorance” – Robert Orben, underscores that while education may seem costly, the long-term consequences of ignorance – such as poor decision-making, inequality, and societal stagnation – are far more damaging and expensive. The table below indicates the root causes of Meghalaya’s poor Performance Grading Index 2.0 which currently ranks lowest in India’s PGI 2.0 Index.

Domain	Key Issues Identified
Learning Outcomes	Weak foundational literacy and numeracy, poor student performance in early grades
Access and Retention	High dropout rates, low transition rates and declining interest in formal education
Infrastructure	Schools lack toilets, electricity, drinking water and basic furniture.
Governance and Monitoring	Over 200 schools with Zero enrolment: poor teachers’ attendance and unscientific deployment.
Teacher Training	Irregular recruitment, minimal in-service training, and outdated pedagogy.
Budget Allocation	Majority of funds goes to salaries, leaving little for innovation or quality improvement.

Comparative snapshot of North Eastern States performance in school education across key domain (2022-23)

State	Score out of 1000	Learning outcomes	Infrastructure and facilities	Equity	Governance	Grade
Sikkim	631.8	111.6	103.2	216.8	100.2	P2
Mizoram	589.2	97.4	94.6	205.6	94.2	P3
Nagaland	574.4	91.2	92.4	198.6	92.2	P3
Tripura	562.0	88.6	89.8	194.2	89.4	P3
Assam	541.6	85.2	86.4	188.2	85.6	P4
Manipur	528.4	82.3	84.2	182.6	83.4	P4
Arunachal Pradesh	498.2	76.2	80.4	170.6	78.2	P5
Meghalaya	420.6	66.4	46.6	205.6	55.2	A3

Use UDISE+ data to eliminate ghost schools and optimize resource allocation. In the case of Teacher Workforce

"People only see what they are prepared to see."

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

The Shillong Times

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SHILLONG, FRIDAY, JULY 11, 2025

Row over CJI residence

AN unsavoury row has been created over the failure on the part of former Chief Justice DY Chandrachud to vacate his official residence many months after his exit from the post. That the apex court has made a formal complaint to the housing ministry seeking eviction of the ex-CJI shows the seriousness of the issue. A former chief justice who headed the apex court is, in effect, violating the law. This is a sad commentary on the nation's judicial system itself.

Dignity of the Supreme Court, or any institution for that matter, rests solely on the dignified conduct of those who run, or ran it. Notably, however, the Supreme Court has had embarrassments relating to some CJIs in recent times. The institution of CJI is facing odds due to the 'musical chair' style of frequent promotions and appointments to this exalted post. The present CJI Justice BR Gavai has only about six months to remain in this chair before he retires; that too inclusive of the long summer recess that came in between. Chandrachud himself had only two years to hold the post before his retirement in November last year. Then came Sanjiv Khanna for no more than six months. It's a pity that the CJI before Chandrachud, Justice UU Lalit, sat in the chair for just over two months. Before a CJI sits down and gains his full composure, retirement bells toll. It goes without saying that, due to such disruptions, the system will suffer serious damage.

As of now, the government has its limitations to correct the judicial system. Unless and until a bold government that means business comes and gives new energy to the judicial system, the scenario of palpable, pronounced drift would continue. The attempt of any government should be to strengthen the system, not to weaken it. Significantly, an argument advanced by Chandrachud, that his daughter was undergoing treatment in a prominent Delhi hospital and hence he wanted to stay on in the same house looks silly. Both should have no connection whatsoever. This is unacceptable also for the reason that Chandrachud has been offered an alternative official residence to move out to, but he wouldn't. If he's taking liberties, this is unbecoming of the exalted position that he held. That the SC administration had to run with a complaint to the Housing Ministry showed the limits of its patience. It must, however, be noted that several parliamentarians including former ministers have taken such liberties and advanced lame excuses in the past and stayed on, and on, in their official residences. Political culture is admittedly low but judicial culture cannot be equated with, or run parallel to that. Systems must be held sacrosanct and these must be allowed to run their normal course without interruptions. It's a pity that a former CJI does not understand this or its seriousness and creates a wrong precedent to his successors too.

Letters to the Editor

Neither misleading nor misinformed

Editor,

In response to Bhogtaram Mawroh's letter titled "Law Misquoted, Questions Deserve Answers," (ST July 8, 2025), I wish to correct several factual inaccuracies and address the misleading assertion that I "invented" a section of law to support my argument.

Mawroh claims that I cited a "non-existent" Section 10 (1) of the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014. A simple reading of the Act, available through official government portals and legal databases, would show that Section 10 exists in full and is titled "Cancellation or Suspension of Certificate of Vending". The provision explicitly states:

"Where a street vendor who has been issued a certificate of vending under this Act commits breach of any of the conditions thereof or any other terms and conditions specified for the purpose of regulating street vending under this Act or any rules or schemes made thereunder... the Town Vending Committee may... cancel or suspend the certificate..."

In other words, a vendor

who violates the terms of their certificate, or refuses to cooperate with regulation, is acting unlawfully. This is not my opinion. It is the language of the law, as passed by Parliament and applicable across the country including in Meghalaya. Mr. Mawroh's claim that there is "no subsection (1)" is incorrect. While the Act may not use numeric subsection labels in the traditional way (1, 2, 3...), the opening paragraph of Section 10 is understood as its primary operative clause. Legal readers and drafters routinely cite the main operative paragraph as "subsection (1)" for clarity, a common practice across Indian legislation. Furthermore, the suggestion that I distorted facts because I did not cite the entire legislative framework is disingenuous. My article made a focused argument: that vending is protected when legal, but unlawful when it defies the conditions set under the Act and disrupts public safety. This does not contradict the spirit of the Act, it upholds it.

While the Gurnam Kaur judgement dates back to 1989, the principal it establishes, that vending must not obstruct public space, remains good law. It has neither been reversed nor diluted by subsequent Supreme Court rulings or the 2014 act. Age alone does not

Sometime we tend to believe the worst of ourselves and conclude that education is Meghalaya's most difficult mountain to scale until we go through online literature and realise that the whole world is grappling with poor educational outcomes, including the US which we often believe is the country that can offer a masterclass in every department of life. Successive Presidents have tried their own mantra to improve education but have not succeeded because educational reforms which deal with individuals that are creative; are curious and have their own calling, are instead emphasizing on a standardized sort of system where kids are sitting for hours in a dull classroom that expects compliance. There is no space for them to jump and scream and shout when they feel like because the education system we have created over centuries have instilled strict discipline. And this is what has killed creativity, curiosity and the ability to question. Albert Einstein very aptly stated, Education is not learning of facts but training of the mind to think."

Now let's try to understand what the word "think" actually means. It means to use one's mind actively to form connected ideas, opinions, or judgments. Are our students able to connect ideas and then form an opinion upon which they base their judgments and act on those? Many of them receive read-made ideas from teachers, make them their own and don't think beyond that single idea because they don't trust their own ability to think and because the system does not encourage students to have multiple ideas or even ideas that contest those of the teacher's. Thinking is what leads to curiosity. And what is curiosity? It is the desire to learn something. It is the engine of achievements. Curiosity is what drives a child to contest an idea, to question and to experiment. Alas! Instead of curiosity we have a system of compliance in which students and teachers are to follow a set of fixed algorithms. The result of how much a student can comply is reflected in the grades she earns.

In this educational culture, obedience and discipline are rewarded while questioning is penalized. Hence the system does not reward independent thinking. So, what happens then? We stop thinking and become cogs in a wheel. Without using the faculty of thinking we become uncritical and accepting of whatever is told to us. We have lost the most critical faculty of questioning

make a precedent invalid. If Municipal Corporation of Delhi v. Gurnam Kaur were truly outdated and invalid, then why is it still being actively cited by High Courts as recently as May 2025, including in Malkit Singh v. State of U.T. Chandigarh? In that very case, the Punjab and Haryana High Court upheld the core principle laid down in Gurnam Kaur, that while street vending is a protected livelihood, it is not an unregulated or absolute right. So I must ask: what gives Mawroh the authority to dismiss a Supreme Court ruling that continues to shape legal interpretation across the country? Is his opinion more valid than binding precedent reaffirmed by multiple High Courts? If the judiciary still finds this case relevant in defending a balance between regulation and rights, legal precedent is not undone by personal ideology or selective readings. It is tested and affirmed in court, and Gurnam Kaur has passed that test time and again. Dismissing it because it doesn't suit a political narrative is not legal reasoning, it's evasion.

Mawroh also presents two scenarios, that I am either misinformed or deliberately misleading. I would counter that there is a third, and more accurate, possibility: that my position is informed, legal, and

which in turn is what sharpens our thinking.

I am currently reading the book, "Rethinking Curriculum in Times of Shifting Educational Context," by Kaustuv Roy borrowed from the Azim Premji University Library. This book ought to be read by policy makers who yearn to bring about better learning outcomes. To do that they first have to understand the intrinsic meaning of education. This book unbundles the weight of curriculum that hangs like the sword of Damocles over each teacher; so much so the joy of learning is compromised.

Roy very succinctly states, "Across the world, educational institutions, in particular schools have systematically worked towards their own obsolescence by failing to show existential possibilities beyond a narrow cognitive spectrum. Today in many schools and colleges across various societies, we face a phalanx of indifferent students whose primary source of learning about themselves and the world is not the school or the formal curriculum. They put up with school simply because it holds sway in the public imaginary and controls institutionalized norms of credentialing. Given a choice many would not turn up. The curriculum is at best tolerated, at worst hated. All this makes for a peculiarly unhappy state of affairs, an unhappiness that has become institutionalized. But learned unhappiness is dangerous; it leads to widening circles of disaffection and malady."

A reason for this overriding cynicism says Roy is that the curriculum does not seem to be the efficient cause of anything. Everything in our lives seems to be controlled and regulated by some invisible power that pays scant attention to us and the youth are aware of this at some level. They see the curriculum as a distant possibility for them to secure a career even while formal education seems to have become inert in the actual intellectual, emotional, oral growth of most young adults. There is a disconnect between school learning and life experiences. This aspect of school failure and curriculum reform is regularly brainstormed by educational experts but with little results. Instead, some seem to think that technology is the solution to these real life problems. Roy states that technology is only but a small extension of the brain's own internal circuitry. The brain can only recuperate itself in various ways hence

grounded in lived realities, those of citizens who walk these crowded footpaths daily, including the elderly, schoolchildren, and persons with disabilities.

I do not speak from an ivory tower. I am a student and a resident of Laitumkhrah. I witness firsthand the chaos caused by encroached pavements, ambulances blocked near Nazareth Hospital, and vulnerable pedestrians forced onto the road, causing accidents etc. These are not imagined problems. They are daily dangers. The Government of Meghalaya has established a legal vending zone at the MUDA Complex and other venues. Out of 400 stalls built, 248 vendors have already agreed to relocate. If relocation were truly a "death sentence" to livelihoods, as some have claimed, why have the majority agreed to move? Why would vendors voluntarily want to shift to "cages," unless they saw value in legal stability, shelter from the elements, and the support of government compensation?

Mawroh's concern about irregularities in vending certificates should absolutely be addressed, but that does not justify threats, aggression, or refusal to vacate clearly marked no-vending zones. The law is not a buffet from which one picks only what suits their narrative. It is a framework that balances

there is danger in imagining that technology is capable of bringing in salvation.

As in India, experiences in the US have shown that poverty and affluence are the most important determinants of test scores. This strong correlation is borne out in every standardized test pitted against a bell curve that reflects family income and education. And always, affluent kids have dominated the top while poor kids are at the bottom. Those who have proposed reforms in education in the US have therefore agreed that they can ameliorate the impact of poverty on children and families by ensuring that kids have access to nutrition, medical care, and decent housing. The US Government went further and even addressed the medical needs of pregnant women to ensure that their children are born healthy — meaning that a child must have adequate nutrition right in the mother's womb to have the right cognitive development. We all know that in Meghalaya large numbers of children suffer malnutrition and under-nutrition and how that affects their learning. Is the state able to address this, apart from the bigger challenge of halting the rapid drop-out rate?

I am bringing in a comparison between the Indian and American education system because there are stark similarities between the two. The US, once a global leader, has slipped over the past few decades and now ranks far behind other developed countries in terms of educational outcomes. There are several reasons for this, and the ten most crucial factors contributing to the failure of the US education system appears to be our cup of woes too.

They include:

- (1) Insufficient funding which results in non-payment of teachers' salaries or underpaid teachers and dilapidated classrooms.
- (2) Outdated curriculum has hampered students from acquiring contemporary skills that address current societal demand and job market requirements. Now the NEP 2020 is a one shoe fits all model which is unlikely to work.
- (3) Overemphasis on Standardized Testing puts pressure on students and teachers. Such high stakes testing that test only the memory will diminish creativity and critical thinking.
- (4) Inequality of opportunity is Meghalaya's bane. Income-based inequality denies high quality education access to all students.
- (5) Inadequate Teacher

Retention where skilled educators leave the profession due to low salaries, increasing workloads, and lack of support. This frequent turnover directly impacts the quality of education provided to students

(6) Lack of Parental Involvement is a major cause of poor educational outcomes in India/Meghalaya. It goes without saying that when parents take an active interest in their child's schooling, it can lead to better student engagement and achievement. But how can poor, semi-literate parents be of any help to their kids?

(7) Lack of Early Childhood Education is what mars a child's future. Studies show that early childhood education significantly influences a child's future academic success but we know that many kids don't have the luxury of pre-school education and are therefore disadvantaged

(8) Limited Support for English Language Learners (ELL). Students who don't speak English as their first language often struggle in the classroom due to insufficient assistance or resources. This is a huge drawback for rural students in particular. Schools need to invest in specialized support services to ensure ELL students can succeed academically

(9) Neglect of Social and Emotional Learning: The focus on academics often overshadows the most critical factors of learning, namely social and emotional learning. Educating students on communication, empathy, and self-awareness allows them to develop into well-rounded individuals. Currently the number of youth afflicted by mental illness is on the rise but we even are not aware of it

10. Overcrowded classrooms: It needs no emphasis that too many students in a classroom negatively affects the learning environment. Teachers struggle to offer personalized attention when that is what a student craves for. Naturally this leads to a decline in students' academic performance.

The question is whether the above factors can or will be addressed by our governance system because at the end of the day this will come under educational governance. There is need to admit that the present educational system has huge limitations and benefits those that could afford alternative systems. It is important for the Government to understand the limitations of the current system before stepping towards change and developing an educational system that truly benefits all students equally. Equal access to the best education system is critical.

Yours etc.,

Lyzander E. Sohkhlet
Via email

A step towards inclusive healthcare and cultural validation

Editor,

Through these columns I would like to express my appreciation for your recent coverage of two significant developments: the reports - "Traditional medicine key to achieving global goals of universal health coverage" and "4 Garo traditional healers get NECU accreditation".

Together, these stories mark an encouraging shift in public health discourse, wherein indigenous knowledge systems—often side-

lined in mainstream medical narratives—are finally receiving the recognition they deserve. The accreditation of four Garo traditional healers by the North East Christian University (NECU) is not only a proud moment for the Garo Hills, but also a significant milestone in the evolving relationship between traditional medicine and modern healthcare frameworks.

As a sociologist who explored indigenous healing practices and traditional medicine during my MA dissertation, I find this recognition both meaningful and timely. These traditional systems are not merely curative but are deeply cultural—woven with oral traditions, spirituality, ecological knowledge, and community trust.

The mainstream validation of traditional healers—through scientific protocols, ethical training, and certification—represents a step toward integrating community-based knowledge into national health frameworks without erasing their identity. It signals a more democratic approach to healthcare, where diverse medical epistemologies are acknowledged and respected.

However, this effort must not stop at certification alone. The greater challenge lies in ensuring that such systems

Seeking a balanced and inclusive approach on ILP and Minority Rights in Meghalaya

By Homnath Gautam

The demand for the implementation of ILP is deeply rooted in the indigenous tribal communities Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo to safeguard their cultural identity, land, and traditional rights. These concerns are legitimate and deserve sincere attention in a democratic and diverse society. The fear of being reduced to a minority in their own land is real for them, and this sentiment has shaped much of the current discourse.

At the core of this fear lies the issue of influx especially from across the border, including illegal Bangladeshi migrants. This is a serious concern, and every community tribal or non-indigenous (non-tribal) must stand united to prevent such infiltration. Thankfully, Meghalaya has a strong traditional village system where every locality is overseen by a headman (Rangbah Shnong). Most of them are already doing their best to keep a close watch on who enters and resides in their villages.

In urban areas like Shillong, we already follow a local verification system. Most residents are registered under their respective villages, and whenever someone wishes to shift to a new locality, they must produce a residence certificate from their previous village or locality. Only then are they permitted to take a rental house or accommodation elsewhere. This existing mechanism, combined with community vigilance, is already a strong filter against illegal settlers.

In fact, it is also our collective duty to inform our headman or local authority if we see strangers or suspicious individuals in our neighbourhood. This not only strengthens community safety but ensures that genuine residents are not mistaken for outsiders.

From the perspective of the non-tribal population who have lived here for generations, contributed to the economy, and share a deep bond with Meghalaya, there is growing anxiety. While time and again, the Government and pressure groups have assured that "genuine non-tribals will not be harassed," the big question remains—how will our interests be protected?

At present, there is no clear legal framework that protects non-tribals in matters such as:

- Employment in state departments.
- Business licenses and trade registrations and restrictions
- Land transfer even between non-tribals.

It's also worth noting that the non-tribal population has declined from 20% at the time of statehood to around 9% today. This shift should not be ignored and must prompt reflection on the lived experience of non-tribals in the

state. Another long-pending concern is the non-issuance of OBC certificates to eligible non-tribals. Many Central Government institutions in Meghalaya offer reservations under the OBC category, but our own state government has stop issuing OBC certificates to genuine non-tribal. This not only deprives local non-tribals of rightful opportunities but also invites competition from outsiders who use OBC status to apply in Meghalaya. It must be emphasized that granting OBC status to eligible individuals will not affect the existing SC/ST reservation quotas, which are constitutionally safeguarded.

Additionally, there is growing concern about the state's new roster system being applied even to minority-run and linguistic minority institutions, which will severely affect these long-standing institutions. It sends a message that the government is not concerned about our rights or contributions. We often feel like fourth-class citizens in our own state. While the Government of India is actively supporting tribal upliftment nationally, in Meghalaya, minorities feel ignored and marginalised. We sometimes painfully ask ourselves why our forefathers chose this land to call home.

Though we are not against any law passed by the Government of Meghalaya be it ILP or MRSSA our concern lies in the protection of our rights. A law, however well-intentioned, must provide equal clarity and assurance to all communities that have contributed towards the growth and development of the state. We must also reflect on the experiences of other North-eastern states where ILP is implemented—such as Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Mizoram. Although intended to safeguard the rights of the indigenous communities, these laws have inadvertently resulted in the following challenges:

Decline in private investment and industrial development. Reduced tourism despite immense natural potential.

Limited economic engagement with the rest of India.

In today's globalized world, we cannot afford isolation. True growth lies in inclusive development, not exclusive laws. Ironically, it is the tribal communities themselves who will suffer most if economic opportunities, tourism, and investment begin to shrink.

In conclusion, while the preservation of indigenous identity is essential, it must not come at the cost of exclusion and imbalance. The Government of Meghalaya and all stakeholders must ask: How will genuine non-tribals be protected under ILP, MRSSA, and future policies? Without honest answers, this state risks repeating a dangerous cycle of mistrust and division.

Indian flag in our city keeps disappearing like it's doing part-time work as a magician's assistant? Apparently, the flag's into modern dating, because it ghosts a lot. Maybe it's polyamorous too, with multiple states on rotation, too busy fluttering wherever convenient. One week, it's flying high and commanding us all to stand a little straighter and suddenly remember the national anthem. The next week? Gone, vanished without a trace. No note, no "BRB", no cheeky "Gone for dry-cleaning." Not even a cryptic tweet. Just empty skies and confused pigeons. Some say it's maintenance and others whisper about secret night ops or alien research on nationalism. Is this a flag or a celebrity cameo? Why does it have more off-days than a government office? If it's going to keep ghosting us, at least give it an Instagram account @SpotTheGhostingFlag. Until then, we shall remain emotionally invested in this accidental game of hide-and-seek. Just a mango citizen here, trying to click one decent photo of the flag for the 20th time.

Yours etc,
Shivani Pde
Via email

Curious case of the missing flag

Editor,

Can someone please explain why the massive

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

*"You are remembered for the rules
you break."*
— Douglas MacArthur
The Shillong Times
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Who will push societal reforms?

HEALTH Minister Ampareen Lyngdoh while speaking of the growing crimes against women in Meghalaya pointed at the need for legal and social reforms to address this malaise. While the judiciary since the time of the Nirbhaya rape case has come up with many enlightening laws to better empower women and deal strictly with crimes against them, societal reforms are tardy. Justice JS Verma is remembered for those legal reforms which led to the legislation of Prevention of Children from Sexual Harassment Act (PoCSO) and strengthening laws against rape. The Justice Verma Committee further recommended educational reforms vis a vis imparting sex education to school children. It recommended that children's experiences should not be gendered and that education on sexuality be imparted to children. It also proposed adult literacy programmes as being necessary for gender empowerment.

Needless to in Meghalaya sex is a taboo for open discussion but children are consuming loads of sex videos and are wanting to experiment it in real life. Romantic relationships among adolescents lead to unwanted pregnancies that become the burden of only the woman/girl. Yet we live in a society where sex is discussed in hushed tones. Even educational institutions are not ready to discuss sex upfront when that should be the training ground to sensitise adolescents about the perils of teenage pregnancies. Such discussions cannot be gender-segregated. They need to be discussed where both genders are present because both need massive awareness on protected sex. The fact that so many young lives are ruined due to unintended and unplanned pregnancies should have made the society sit up and think of ways forward to prevent these accidental childbirths that become a lifelong burden but because this burdens the woman/girl only, the initiative should be aggressively taken up by women's organisations since the Dorbar Shnong seems to walk on eggshells as far as the issue of sex is concerned. Meghalaya now boasts of several self-help groups (SHGs) organised for economic empowerment especially of poor rural women. Leaders of these SHGs should also be trained to empower other young women on protected sex and condom use. In rural Meghalaya condom use is considered to be against certain religious tenets. The question is what are those religions and religious heads doing to prevent teenage pregnancies and sexual assault on women and girls when this is the single most important reason for poverty that then affects all other areas of life?

For a society that is constantly projecting itself as being culturally superior to others and sweeps under the carpet the atrocities that regularly afflict women such as a man abandoning his wife/partner after having fathered two or three children and does not know the meaning of "alimony," women continue to have a raw deal. Matriliny unfortunately disguises and covers up all these societal flaws. Unless society honestly dissects all these problems in a frank, free and fearless manner and takes corrective measures not much will change in the Hynniewtre society. Voice as agency for women to address their issues needs to be recognised. Women should raise their voices in appropriate platforms.

Preserving Seed Sovereignty: NER's heirloom challenge

By KN Kumar

The push for high-yielding varieties (HYVs) and hybrid seeds, driven by multinational corporations (MNCs) and our own National Agricultural Research System, poses a threat to the rich biodiversity of native (heirloom) seeds that have supported communities for centuries. This issue is particularly urgent in Northeast India, a biodiversity hot-spot that is home to unique land-races adapted to local micro-climates and soils. To protect this genetic wealth, ensure food security, and combat the risks of monoculture, there is a pressing need to establish community-led seed banks across the region. Through this article, I urge the state government to develop a plan to establish a network of community-driven seed banks in each of Meghalaya's five agro-climatic zones.

Importance of Native Seeds

Native seeds, often referred to as land-races, are the result of many generations of both natural selection and adaptation. These seeds are suited to local environmental conditions, require fewer chemical inputs, and are resilient to stresses such as droughts, floods, and pests. Northeast India, recognized as one of the world's 36 biodiversity hot-spots, is home to traditional crops such as rice, millets, spices, and pulses that thrive across various micro-climates, from Assam's flood-prone plains to Arunachal's hilly terrains. According to the 2022 ScienceDirect study, there are likely over 9,500 land-races of paddy alone in Northeast India. The evidence suggests high diversity, making Northeast India a key area for preserving agricultural heritage through community-led seed banks. These seeds are not just agrarian assets; they are cultural and nutritional treasures. Communities in the Northeast have cultivated unique varieties, such as Meghalaya's red pumpkin and Assam's flood-tolerant rice, which are integral to local diets and traditions. Navdanya (an NGO) has conserved 33 salt-tolerant and 54 flood-tolerant rice varieties in Odisha, highlighting land-races' ability to withstand climate challenges. Unlike HYVs, which often prioritize yield over nutrition, native seeds offer diverse flavours, medicinal properties, and resilience.

The Trap of High-Yielding Varieties and MNCs

The Green Revolution of the 1960s shifted India's

focus toward HYVs, promising higher yields to support a growing population. While these varieties initially increased production, they also brought significant costs: a greater reliance on chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and irrigation, which harmed soil health and raised farming expenses. Now, the latest development: The Government of India's National Mission on High-Yielding Seeds, launched in the 2025-26 Union Budget, aims to develop more than 100 new seed varieties, which could further reduce traditional seed diversity.

Multinational corporations (MNCs) have capitalized on this shift, dominating seed markets with patented hybrids that often come with licensing restrictions. In NER, where small and marginal farmers are predominant, this model is especially harmful. The high cost of commercial seeds, coupled with their dependence on chemical inputs, burdens farmers with debt and restricts their autonomy. Additionally, monoculture farming promoted by HYVs makes crops more vulnerable to pests and diseases, as seen in the 2022 dwarf virus outbreak in Punjab's paddy fields. Vandana Shiva of Navdanya, a leading advocate for seed sovereignty, has highlighted how seed monopolies driven by MNCs threaten biodiversity and increase chemical usage. The key point is that community seed banks are vital tools for preserving agricultural diversity and empowering farmers. The Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) estimates that community seed banks across India hold over 887 climate-resilient varieties, but poor documentation and funding limit their impact. Community seed banks are grassroots efforts that enable farmers to conserve, exchange, and multiply native seeds. In Karnataka, the GREEN Foundation has partnered with small farmers to establish seed banks, recognizing women as essential custodians of seed knowledge. Similarly, Navdanya's 150 seed banks across 22 states have preserved over 4,000 rice varieties, demonstrating the scalability of such models.

matched, hosting thousands of indigenous crop varieties. For instance, the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation's Tribal Agro-biodiversity Centre in Jeypore, Odisha, preserves over 1,200 rice varieties, many of which share genetic traits with Northeastern land-races. I once did a bit of research of my own, to discover that there are at least seven different land-races of chillies in the NER. I am aware of an initiative by a woman farmer from the West Khasi Hills who preserved a native land-race of paddy. In the Northeast, community seed banks can serve multiple purposes: (1) conserving genetic diversity, (2) providing access to climate-resilient seeds, and (3) promoting seed sovereignty. By involving local farmers, these banks help preserve traditional knowledge and practices, as seen in the Kolli Hills, where women farmers have revived millet cultivation through seed festivals.

A State-Led Scheme

To harness the Northeast's potential as a seed conservation hub for the country, I suggest that each state government develop a comprehensive plan to establish a network of community-led seed banks. Meghalaya stands out among the states in the region for its sensitivity toward farmers; therefore, it can take the lead in inspiring all Northeastern states for a national impact. Each state should set up a central traditional Seed Bank and create agro-climatic zone-specific seed banks within its jurisdiction. The proposed scheme could include the following components:

1. Establishment of community-led seed banks: Develop a network of community-managed seed banks in each agro-climatic zone of the state, connected to a central conservation centre. These banks should record and store land-races, with an emphasis on climate-resilient varieties.

Northeast India: A Biodiversity Hotspot at Risk

Northeast India's agro-ecological diversity is un-

matched, hosting thousands of indigenous crop varieties. For instance, the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation's Tribal Agro-biodiversity Centre in Jeypore, Odisha, preserves over 1,200 rice varieties, many of which share genetic traits with Northeastern land-races. I once did a bit of research of my own, to discover that there are at least seven different land-races of chillies in the NER. I am aware of an initiative by a woman farmer from the West Khasi Hills who preserved a native land-race of paddy. In the Northeast, community seed banks can serve multiple purposes: (1) conserving genetic diversity, (2) providing access to climate-resilient seeds, and (3) promoting seed sovereignty. By involving local farmers, these banks help preserve traditional knowledge and practices, as seen in the Kolli Hills, where women farmers have revived millet cultivation through seed festivals.

We must all note that many of these land-races are facing extinction due to the spread of commercial agriculture and insufficient conservation infrastructure. In the Northeast, where traditional seed-saving practices are still maintained, there is a unique opportunity to expand these efforts before the region's genetic diversity is lost forever.

A State-Led Scheme

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Northeast India: A Biodiversity Hotspot at Risk

Northeast India's agro-ecological diversity is un-

ers, especially women, in seed selection, storage, and organic farming techniques. Provide incentives such as certification as "biodiversity custodians," an approach pioneered by an NGO, 'Sahaja Samrudha'.

3. Policy Support and Funding: Allocate funds to develop infrastructure, such as storage facilities, using traditional methods. Policies should also prioritize native seeds in public procurement programmes, ensuring market demand. The relentless pursuit of high-yielding varieties should be pushed back.

4. Collaboration with NGOs and Research Institutions: Partner with organizations like Navdanya, CSE, and MSSRF to leverage their expertise in seed conservation. Empower the farmers to undertake surveys for identifying new landraces. Organize regional workshops to address this issue and develop a detailed, comprehensive action plan.

5. Public Awareness Campaigns: Promote the nutritional and ecological benefits of native crops through seed festivals and 'native cooking' competitions to counter the urban preference for polished, high-yielding grains and pulses.

Challenges and the Way Forward

Community seed banks face challenges like funding shortages, declining interest in traditional seeds, and competition from HYVs. To tackle these issues, the state scheme must integrate seed conservation into broader agricultural policies, ensuring native seeds are not overshadowed by commercial interests. Successful models such as the Deccan Development Society's work (Zaheerabad, Telangana) with 5,000 women farmers near Hyderabad can help the Northeast build a robust seed-saving movement.

The Northeast's biodiversity is a national treasure, and protecting it is essential. A state-led plan to establish community seed banks will not only safeguard land-races but also empower farmers, decrease dependence on multinational corporations, and promote the development of a resilient food system. The time to act is now—before the region's genetic heritage is lost forever. This is the kind of task that the BRDC should consider working along with the Agriculture Department. I hope someone out there reads articles like this one.

The writer is former member of the IAS

Not Rich vs Poor - Just Lawful vs Unlawful

The Politics of Pavement: Illegal Vending Hurts Us All

By Risador M Makri

Much of the current debate around the relocation of street vendors in Shillong has been reduced to a tired and misleading binary: rich versus poor. This framing is not only inaccurate, it is dangerous. It paints a picture in which small business owners, pedestrians, and citizens asking for order are cast as villains, and illegal encroachers are elevated to heroes of struggle. But are people who own small stores or sell merchandise in shops now considered "anti-poor" or "the richest" or "elitist"? That's a ridiculous leap. Most of these shopkeepers are barely making ends meet themselves, paying rent, taxes, utilities, and staff wages. They follow the law, operate within legal frameworks, and contribute to the economy. To paint them as villains simply because they operate from within buildings instead of pavements is a lazy and dishonest generalisation.

Death of Local Commerce

The vendors who now resist relocation were, until recently, running stalls inside the very markets that are slowly dying. Shops in local markets are shutting down because customers cannot reach them. Why? Because the roads and footpaths are overrun by stalls that violate every safety and civic norm. In some cases, these very stall owners have abandoned their legitimate spaces and chosen street vending instead. This is not survival, it is opportunism, and it is strangling the economic future of the entire locality.

When Safety Is Sacrificed for Noise

When concerned citizens speak up, when we say that pedestrians matter, that children and the elderly need space to walk, that ambulances deserve a clear path, we are told we lack empathy. But is empathy a monopoly of those who shout the loudest? Angela Rangad, who once publicly decried the blocking of a particular ambulance by cars in Laitumkhrah, now remains silent as multiple ambulances are forced to maneuver through hawkerclogged roads near hospitals that are blocked everyday. If she was outraged then, where is her outrage now? Angela, I invite you now to visit the road in front of Nazareth Hospital and see ambulances stuck behind layers of stalls and plastic tarps. Is the pain of the patient any less when the roadblock is a hawkerc instead of a car?

Misrepresenting the Law:

Some critics recently claimed that a law had been "misquoted" but what he fails to mention is that the interpretation in question is not only commonly accepted, but rooted in repeated court rulings and government action.

He accuses critics of misrepresentation while cherry-picking only the points that suit his narrative. Instead of addressing the broader concerns, pedestrian safety, obstruction near hospitals, harassment of the differently abled, he dodges them entirely. Because those truths don't fit neatly into his performance of moral outrage. And Section 10 (1) of the Street Vendors Act clearly states that those who violate the conditions of their vending certificates may be relocated or even suspended, with due process. Yet in Shillong, many vendors operate without any certificates at all, or have secured them through misrepresentation. When the Government attempts to verify these documents, it is met with hostility and threats. This is not dignified resistance. This is anarchy.

The Majority Have Relocated Willingly

Let us also not pretend that the current opposition to relocation is purely altruistic. The loudest critics, many of whom hide behind anonymity, belong to organisations and circles with vested interests. Their goal is not justice, it is disruption. They do not speak for the average vendor, the one who has already agreed to shift. Over 248 hawkers are willing to move voluntarily to the MUDA complex. If it were truly a death sentence to their trade, why would they be willing to do it? The only people resisting the relocation are members of organisations with other interests; people who need a constant crisis to stay relevant. If the system works, they become invisible. So they fight, not for the poor, but for their own spotlight.

Activism Without Accountability

What is being peddled as a people's uprising is in fact the ideological theatre of a handful of "activists" clinging to outdated Marxist narratives. Lakhs of citizens across Meghalaya support the Government's action because we are just tired of being told that wanting order, dignity, and safety in our own city makes us the enemy.

Equal Misery Is Not Justice

There is nothing wrong in saying that unregulated vending must be corrected. It is not criminal to say that public spaces must serve all, not just those who shout the loudest.

Marxist ideology claims to uplift the poor, but in practice it often pulls everyone else down instead. If your solution to inequality is to destroy functioning systems rather than fix broken ones, then all you are doing is manufacturing poverty. We do not need a city of equal misery. We need a city of equal opportunity and that begins with law, dignity, and public order.

Letters to the Editor

Struggles of retired college teachers under MDA Govt

Editor,

Through the columns of your newspaper, I write with a deep sense of disheartenment and frustration about the plight of retired teachers of deficit colleges in Meghalaya under the MDA Government. The attitude of the MDA Government towards the retired teachers of deficit colleges comes across as apathetic, misanthropic, to the extent of jeopardising the quality of life and survival.

For those who spent their lives nurturing young minds in college classrooms, retirement should be a time of peace, dignity, and well-earned rest. However, in Meghalaya, a considerable number of retired college teachers from deficit institutions find themselves caught in a web of delays, neglect, and institutional silence.

These educators, who once stood as pillars of higher education, now face long and uncertain waits for the release of their gratuity—a statutory right under the Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972,

which mandates payment within 30 days of retirement. Instead, many are forced to wait months, even years, for what is rightfully theirs.

Gratuity is not a gesture of charity; it is a form of deferred compensation for years of dedicated service. Failure to release it on time causes financial instability and has a profound impact on the emotional and mental well-being of those who once led our educational institutions.

Compounding the issue is the unfair and retroactive demand for refunds on so-called "overdrawn" salary amounts—errors in pay scale fixation made long ago, often by the administration itself. These demands are raised only after retirement, when individuals no longer have the financial cushion or procedural channels to respond. Such actions raise a critical ethical question: Should retired teachers be held solely accountable for systemic errors they neither caused nor benefited from knowingly?

Even more disheartening is the delay in releasing 50% of the employees' share of the Central Provident Fund (CPF). Although the State Government, compelled by the High Court of Meghalaya's directive, initiated

the process of transferring accumulated funds into a centralised system under the MPF Act, 1969, the money now remains dormant. Eight months have passed without a single subscriber account number issued, nor any clarity about accrued interest. This inaction speaks volumes about the slow churn of bureaucracy in contrast to the urgency of retirees' needs.

Even the long-awaited Pension Scheme, born from years of legal struggle, continues to languish in bureaucratic slow motion. Retired teachers welcomed the court-mandated Pension Scheme as a long-overdue recognition of their service. But even after its approval and submission to the State Government in 2023, it remains stuck in a vortex of delay, dented by official apathy. Despite Court Directives, the Government's apathy toward implementing the Pension Scheme has only deepened the injustice. The enthusiasm once sparked by the scheme has turned to frustration as another year slips by.

This delay is not merely an administrative lapse or administrative inefficiency; it is a violation of livelihood, a quiet erosion of dignity, and a quiet form of erasure, and a

breach of trust.

It may be reiterated that these recurring lapses do not simply reflect inefficiency. They amount to institutional neglect, undermining the dignity of those who once carried the weight of shaping future generations. Retired teachers of deficit colleges deserve timely dues, transparent procedures, and the respect earned over decades of service.

Retired teachers of deficit colleges are not asking for favours—they are demanding fairness, transparency, and the fulfilment of rights they have lawfully earned.

In honouring teachers after retirement, we honour education itself. It is time that the Government, Education Departments, College Managements and all Stakeholders act decisively to ensure the timely disbursement of dues, resolve legacy errors with compassion and clarity, and deliver on post-retirement pensionary benefits.

Anything less would be a betrayal, not just of the individuals affected, but of the ideals that education stands for.

Yours etc.,
An aggrieved retired college teacher,
Name withheld on request.
Via email

From echoes to ink

Editor,

Behdienkhlam Festival falls on July 14 this year. My grandparents once migrated from Jowai to Shillong in search of work, and somewhere along the way, our ties to the community there faded and life took its course. Yet, I find myself constantly drawn to the past, to the stories, the folklore, the history that spark those quiet oohs and ahhs within me.

Behdienkhlam is a vibrant four-day traditional festival of the Pnar (Jaintia) people in Meghalaya, celebrated each July after the sowing season, especially in Jowai (West Jaintia Hills) and Tuberkmal (East Jaintia Hills). The word Behdienkhlam means "driving away (beh dien) plague or disease (khlam)," symbolizing the act of chasing away the demon of cholera to protect the health of the community and ensure a good harvest. During the festival, participants seek blessings from their indigenous Niamtre faith deities such as U Mukhai, Mulong, Mooralong, and Musniang, blending spirituality, tradition, and communal unity into a powerful celebration of life and renewal.

During the Covid era, I read the book "Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends" by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, which was such a delightful read that I keep rereading it often. PM Modi has in the past, praised efforts by Amar Vyas (Gaatha), Kathalaya, and the Indian Storytelling Network for reviving oral traditions and documenting stories from India's freedom struggle and folklore. Modi emphasized that preserving these narratives is essential not just for remembering history, but for keeping our cultural soul alive for generations to come.

It's time we pull the hand of folklore from the dusty corners of memory and bring it to the light, from Echoes to Ink, reviving local folklore for future generations. I feel that MBOSE should bring local folklore into our classrooms, not just as a line or two in a history chapter, but as full storytelling sessions, creative projects, or extracurricular activities. Let students hear the tales of Ka Likai, U Thlen, Lum Sohpetbneng, and more. Let them feel them, question them, and carry them forward. If we don't make space for these stories now, we may lose them forever.

Your's etc,
Shivani Pde,
Via email

Voice against a failing postal service

Editor,

A person I know had booked a very important document along with a bank draft to an addressee --- a highly reputed office in Tura. The document, dispatched from GPO Shillong-1 through a special service called "Speed Post" on June 18, 2025, was not delivered until July 7. The online tracking showed that the document had reached Tura on the third day itself, that is, June 20, but had seemingly been locked up in the "vault of oblivion" ever since. Only after a complaint was filed on July 7 was the document delivered to the addressee of that office on the same day. Should the higher authorities in the postal department not take stern action against staff members responsible for this kind of negligence?

In another frustrating incident, I booked a very urgent Speed Post parcel from the same GPO Shillong on June 12, 2025, assuming that the parcel would reach

the consignee in Guwahati within three days. While the tracking information showed that the parcel was delivered on June 16, 2025, the addressee never received it. It was delivered on June 18, but only after I filed a complaint. Had the complaint not been raised, the parcel might have vanished into thin air -- falsely marked as delivered on the postal tracking portal. These are serious cases of negligence and deception that warrant punishment. Imagine the plight of countless people who do not even lodge a complaint to the postal department or through the daily newspapers. Many say that their letters were delivered to consignees only after two or three months!

How can the general public rely on government postal services if even the express service leaves the customer in the lurch. Now all the government chest-thumping about the digital age sounds like empty rhetoric particularly when a "Speed Post" crawls slower than a primitive telegram.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwalli,
Shillong

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

Can chatbots really improve mental health?

Recently, I found myself pouring my heart out, not to a human, but to a chatbot named Wysa on my phone. It nodded - virtually - asked me how I was feeling and gently suggested trying breathing exercises.

As a neuroscientist, I couldn't help but wonder: Was I actually feeling better, or was I just being expertly redirected by a well-trained algorithm? Could a string of code really help calm a storm of emotions? Artificial intelligence-powered mental health tools are becoming increasingly popular - and increasingly persuasive. But beneath their soothing prompts lie important questions: How effective are these tools? What do we really know about how they work? And what are we giving up in exchange for convenience? Of course it's an exciting moment for digital mental health. But understanding the trade-offs and limitations of AI-based care is crucial.

Stand-in meditation and therapy apps and bots AI-based therapy is a relatively new player in the digital therapy field. But the US mental health app market has been booming for the past few years, from apps with free tools that text you back to premium versions with an added feature that gives prompts for breathing exercises.

Headspace and Calm are two of the most well-known meditation and mindfulness apps, offering guided meditations, bedtime stories and calming soundscapes to help users relax and sleep better.

Talkspace and BetterHelp go a step further, offering actual licensed therapists via chat, video or voice. The apps Happify and Moodfit aim to boost mood and challenge negative thinking with game-based exercises.

Somewhere in the middle are chatbot therapists like Wysa and Woebot, using AI to mimic real therapeutic conversations, often rooted in cognitive behavioral therapy. These apps typically offer free basic versions, with paid plans ranging from USD 10 to USD 100 per month for more comprehensive features or access to licensed professionals.

While not designed specifically for therapy, conversational tools like ChatGPT have sparked curiosity about AI's emotional intelligence.

Some users have turned to ChatGPT for mental health advice, with mixed outcomes, including a widely



we're still learning how and why.

Red flags and risks

Apps like Wysa have earned FDA Breakthrough Device designation, a status that fast-tracks promising technologies for serious conditions, suggesting they may offer real clinical benefit. Woebot, similarly, runs randomised clinical trials showing improved depression and anxiety symptoms in new moms and college students.

While many mental health apps boast labels like "clinically validated" or "FDA approved," those claims are often unverified. A review of top apps found that most made bold claims, but fewer than 22 per cent cited actual scientific studies to back them up.

In addition, chatbots collect sensitive information about your mood metrics, triggers and personal stories. What if that data winds up in third-party hands such as advertisers, employers or hackers, a scenario that has occurred with genetic data? In a 2023 breach, nearly 7 million users of the DNA testing company 23andMe had their DNA and personal details exposed after hackers used previously leaked passwords to break into their accounts. Regulators later fined the company more than USD 2 million for failing to protect user data.

Unlike clinicians, bots aren't bound by counselling ethics or privacy laws regarding medical information. You might be getting a form of cognitive behavioral therapy, but you're also feeding a database. And sure, bots can guide you through breathing exercises or prompt cognitive reappraisal, but when faced with emotional complexity or crisis, they're often out of their depth. Human therapists tap into nuance, past trauma, empathy and live feedback loops. Can an algorithm say "I hear you" with genuine understanding? Neuroscience suggests that supportive human connection activates social brain networks that AI can't reach. So while in mild to moderate cases bot-delivered cognitive behavioral therapy may offer short-term symptom relief, it's important to be aware of their limitations. For the time being, pairing bots with human care - rather than replacing it - is the safest move. *(The Conversation)*

Author is Pooja Shree Chettiar (Texas A&M University)

reported case in Belgium where a man died by suicide after months of conversations with a chatbot.

Elsewhere, a father is seeking answers after his son was fatally shot by police, alleging that distressing conversations with an AI chatbot may have influenced his son's mental state. These cases raise ethical questions about the role of AI in sensitive situations.

Where AI comes in

Whether your brain is spiralling, sulking or just needs a nap, there's a chatbot for that. But can AI really help your brain process complex emotions? Or are people just outsourcing stress to silicon-based support systems that sound empathetic? And how exactly does AI therapy work inside our brains? Most AI mental health apps promise some flavor of cognitive behavioral therapy, which is basically structured self-talk for your inner chaos. Think of it as Marie Kondo-ing, the Japanese tidying

expert known for helping people keep only what "sparks joy."

You identify unhelpful thought patterns like "I'm a failure," examine them, and decide whether they serve you or just create anxiety.

But can a chatbot help you rewire your thoughts? Surprisingly, there's science suggesting it's possible. Studies have shown that digital forms of talk therapy can reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, especially for mild to moderate cases. In fact, Woebot has published peer-reviewed research showing reduced depressive symptoms in young adults after just two weeks of chatting.

These apps are designed to simulate therapeutic interaction, offering empathy, asking guided questions and walking you through evidence-based tools.

The goal is to help with decision-making and self-control, and to help calm the nervous system.

The neuroscience behind cognitive behavioral therapy is solid: It's about

activating the brain's executive control centres, helping us shift our attention, challenge automatic thoughts and regulate our emotions.

The question is whether a chatbot can reliably replicate that, and whether our brains actually believe it.

A user's experience, and what it might mean for the brain "I had a rough week," a friend told me recently. I asked her to try out a mental health chatbot for a few days. She told me the bot replied with an encouraging emoji and a prompt generated by its algorithm to try a calming strategy tailored to her mood. Then, to her surprise, it helped her sleep better by week's end.

As a neuroscientist, I couldn't help but ask: Which neurons in her brain were kicking in to help her feel calm? This isn't a one-off story. A growing number of user surveys and clinical trials suggest that cognitive behavioral therapy-based chatbot interactions can lead to short-term improvements in mood, focus and even sleep. In

randomised studies, users of mental health apps have reported reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety - outcomes that closely align with how in-person cognitive behavioral therapy influences the brain.

Several studies show that therapy chatbots can actually help people feel better. In one clinical trial, a chatbot called "Therabot" helped reduce depression and anxiety symptoms by nearly half - similar to what people experience with human therapists.

Other research, including a review of over 80 studies, found that AI chatbots are especially helpful for improving mood, reducing stress and even helping people sleep better. In one study, a chatbot outperformed a self-help book in boosting mental health after just two weeks.

While people often report feeling better after using these chatbots, scientists haven't yet confirmed exactly what's happening in the brain during those interactions. In other words, we know they work for many people, but

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, July 13, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

A bold and exciting year is ahead, filled with high energy and forward movement. The Moon's 150° angle with Mars infuses you with drive, clarity, and a goal-oriented mindset. You'll excel in teamwork, communicate effectively, and earn the support of both colleagues and seniors. Creative professionals—writers, performers, media personalities—will gain widespread recognition. You may receive an opportunity to work abroad or expand your business globally. Those in business will see new contracts and success through innovation. Romantic relationships may blossom quickly and deeply, potentially leading to marriage. Students will study diligently and succeed in their pursuits. A luxurious family vacation or spiritual trip abroad is also on the cards.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You are individualistic brilliant and daring in professional aspects as new projects get under way. This is an exceptionally exciting time as professional and business opportunities are offered to you during this time. You could be impatient in love and relationships as you are overflowing with energy this week. Relationships take on a lighthearted aspect as children play an important role. You are more stimulated by all that is unconventional during this cycle, and your ideas are original and progressive now.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You win debates, competitions and sports with your dynamic energy and power. Emotional attachments and relationships are rewarded with reciprocity. Some interesting people are drawn to you and invite you to work with them. This is a good time to attend to matters that require attention since you are received well by others. Think about the attachments you have—to things, people, and routines—and consider which ones are dragging you down. This is a time when competitive energies and the ego are on a bit of a break.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You would be able to face truths, deal with emotional choices or difficult situations. Your position of power and authority is maintained despite many changes all around. You can draw correct conclusions from previous knowledge of people you meet again personally when making important decisions. Business projects and associations are opening up and widening your horizons so you need to think expansively from now onwards. A new cycle begins with the old order finishing as inner and outer changes are on the cards. Health problems are resolved and your energy is restored.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Personal relations are packed with emotions and feelings and you enjoy the company of loved ones. Practical details are to be dealt with clarity and efficiently. You may be involved in meetings with business associates, as financial and business dealings would bring good results and gains. You can count on your professional and personal partners, as they stand by you. You will work in a free and unrestricted space. Physical energy and good health allow you to tackle busy schedules.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Your actions and emotions are balanced as you bring more accuracy in your work area. You connect with new people and discuss important business matters. Your professional skills wisdom and craft is appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Personal relations are satisfying and you have plenty of goodwill and friendships around you. Your partner is especially supportive. You could be attracted to new people and ideas as you are open and receptive. But you must conserve your financial resources for priorities that have to be met at the end of the week.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) The unpredictable is likely to happen and that too when you least expect it. Surprises are in store for you in professional and personal matters. It would be best to be open and receptive in personal relations and family situations. A flexible approach in the work area is

recommended. New people may come into your life and influence your decisions and direction. Don't be thrown by new developments. Balance in all areas and field of activities is recommended this week. You could be depleted of resources and forces if you don't manage them properly. Meditation and spiritual pursuits can be rewarding and worth pursuing.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This week opens up a world of romance and love in personal relations. You are gracious with family and children. You are likely to be involved in creative pastimes. You would express yourself in a gracious and exalted manner and influence people in authority this week. You may handle more than one project at the same time with expertise and success. Money matters take priority, as some unexpected expenditures have to be met. End of the week brings fresh energy, love and romance in important relationships.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You are likely to spend time in different places and work closely in new associations as you combine good luck and good management. You share some memorable moments with a loved one. You are in touch with an innocence that comes from a life lived fully, which also has a quality of wisdom and the acceptance of the ever changing wonders of life. It would be good to say what you feel as you would be appreciated for your honesty. Good luck in finances and opportunities is encouraging. You are restless and move from one task to the other and pay impromptu visits to friends.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You are bold, courageous and frank while dealing with controversial, professional and family matters. You are likely to meet well known authoritative people and share ideas and spend a fruitful time in their association. A stimulating project should be taken as a challenge that would further and promote your business prospects. Good planning and management lead to progressive and productive ventures. You may take a short break before starting on a new project to renew your energy. You are able to achieve a lot at home and at work with youthful energy.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) Your social life is expansive and a variety of people connect with you. You are stronger and wiser after having gone through trouble and difficulty. It would be wiser to face difficult people and situations rather than escape as there would be victory and success in professional ventures. Communications from overseas are hopeful and exciting as business opportunities are extended to you. Meditation is needed for gaining deeper insight into personal relations and complex situations.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You have the ability to stand alone and have strong positive energy. You are independent, creative, original, ambitious, determined and self-assured. Adopting a realistic, practical and disciplined approach towards life would bring harmony at home. You would have good support from family members. While you work on one project another suddenly gains more importance and demands more attention. A financial windfall is possible as some backlog is handed to you after a period of time. Sports and physical activities keep you fit and energetic.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You are fortunate as things turn out well in difficult situations at work and home during this period. Your financial situation looks promising if you manage it well personally rather than trust upon others. Personal relationships are warm and comfortable as you spend beautiful moments with your loved one. Examining the past in order to improve the future is certainly worthwhile, as long as you don't expend all your energy. Creative opportunities should not be ignored as it is likely to bring substantial professional material gain.

What is cannabis use disorder? And how to tell if it's a problem?

Around 41 per cent of Australians report they've used cannabis at some point in their life.

Research estimates that 22 per cent of recreational cannabis consumers meet criteria for a cannabis use disorder. This condition can make it difficult to control how often or how much cannabis they use.

For medicinal cannabis, our research estimated the percentage of cannabis consumers who meet criteria for a cannabis use disorder was similar, around 25 per cent.

These figures may come as a surprise, as the perceived risks associated with cannabis have been steadily declining in many countries.

So, how can you tell if your cannabis use is a problem?

What does cannabis use disorder look like? A person might use cannabis to relax after a stressful day at work or to help them sleep. At first, they might do so every now and then. But over time, they might come to rely on using cannabis to stop feeling uncomfortable, stressed and sleepless.

They might begin to use cannabis daily to feel "normal".

With regular use, the body develops tolerance to the effects of cannabis. So the person needs to use more cannabis to get the same "high".

People who consume cannabis might use more cannabis than they intended or might have problems performing at work because they're high at the start of the work day, or they fail to do important things such as paying bills, and buy cannabis instead.

The person might keep using cannabis despite noticing their use is causing clouded thoughts, memory issues and anxiety.

Friends and family might notice problems with their cannabis use and recommend they stop or cut back. This can be difficult for people with cannabis use disorder because they may feel anxious, irritable and have difficulty sleeping if they suddenly stop using cannabis.

These withdrawal symptoms can make it harder to quit or cut back. Withdrawal symptoms are quickly relieved by using cannabis, creating a cycle of relapse.

How is it diagnosed?

Health professionals use specific criteria to diagnose a cannabis use disorder.



According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), a person may have a cannabis use disorder if they show at least two symptoms within one year. Symptoms can include: 1) using larger amounts over longer periods than intended 2) cravings for cannabis, where the person feels a strong urge or desire to use cannabis 3) trying and failing to cut back on cannabis use 4) continuing cannabis use despite worsening physical or psychological problems 5) failing to fulfil major role obligations at work, school or home 6) needing to use a greater amount for the same effect, known as tolerance 7) experiencing withdrawal symptoms such as feeling anxious, irritable or having trouble sleeping.

According to the DSM, two to three symptoms indicate a mild cannabis use disorder and few problems. A moderate disorder involves four to five symptoms, while six-plus symptoms means a severe disorder.

Who is at greatest risk?

In both recreational and medicinal consumers, the risk of cannabis use disorder is higher for people who use cannabis:

- 1) frequently, especially daily;
- 2) by smoking or vaping
- 3) with higher levels of THC or in larger amounts.

Other risk factors are starting can-

nabis use at a younger age and using cannabis to relieve symptoms of anxiety, depression and chronic pain.

What's the relationship with chronic pain? People struggling to manage their pain may turn to cannabis hoping to find relief. However, recent studies question the effectiveness of cannabis to manage pain.

So people may increase how often they use cannabis or use more potent cannabis products in an unsuccessful attempt to control their pain.

This can lead to a cannabis use disorder, making it more difficult to manage their pain and impairing their ability to cope with the demands of everyday life.

How to reduce your risk

Legal changes in many countries, including Australia, have allowed greater access to cannabis for medical reasons. People now often use cannabis for both recreational and medical reasons (dual-use).

If you use cannabis, reduce your risk of developing a cannabis use disorder by avoiding daily use and avoiding cannabis products with high THC.

If you're concerned about your cannabis use, consult your medical practitioner or contact the National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline on 1800 250 015 for confidential advice. *(The Conversation)*

"If you cannot do great things, do small things in a great way."

—Napoleon Hill

The Shillong Times

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Age as number

AGE, they say, is just a number. Yet, age matters. With age comes wisdom, a deeper understanding of the intricacies of life. With age also comes a steadily growing weakness to human's physical and mental faculties. All things considered, age has its advantages and disadvantages, with the latter weighing heavier. That's why, for all matters concerning governmental work, age is a major factor, a significant exception being politicians. They make rules for themselves and can go on and on. Their performance levels, unlike bureaucrats and others, are a matter of conjecture. Bluff-masters that are one too many in politics create a make-believe world and make the world believe they are agile even at an advanced age. As long as they remain in power, the media — the main means of information to the public — keep hailing them. We, therefore, live in a make-believe world.

The thought arises in the context of a statement by RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat the other day that "turning 75 is nature's signal to pause and give way to others." His reference was to such sentiments shared by Moropant Pingle, an RSS ideologue; and the occasion an event held in Nagpur to mark the deceased's memory. It's natural for many to see a high-voltage political link to this statement. The RSS is an organisation noted for its discipline. It will be unthinkable that its chief jumps the gun; more so Bhagwat, a disciplinarian himself. A succession plan might be ready there already. Not so in politics, where the dramatis personae are drunk with power and many of them minting money for themselves to unimaginable levels. The more they carry on, the more they can possess.

Modi might be tempted to step down in September, based on the Magdarshak Mandal rule he had himself enforced in 2014. There however is no hint yet to that effect. A change of guard midway through the present term of the central government might look odd as there's no clear second-in-command in the form of a deputy prime minister. Modi's strength is the political stability, coupled with financial stability, that he provided the nation. He erred on several fronts, including the nightmarish currency demonetization decision that was taken without proper preparations, and vis-à-vis the question marks that he raised in the recent engagement with Pakistan. Yet, overall, he still holds an aura, which no other leader in the party can claim to possess. This aura might, or might not, last until 2029, and the hints of which were evident in the 2024 poll itself. This prospect would naturally exercise the minds of the RSS leadership that runs the nation from behind under the NDA dispensation.

The Soul of Celebration: Exploring the Depth of Religious Festivals through Behdeinkhlam

By Dr Omarlin Kyndiah

In a world increasingly driven by spectacle and speed, where festivals are often packaged for mass appeal and economic benefit, there remains a quiet, sacred space where celebration is not just an event but a living expression of identity, belief, and continuity. This space is occupied by religious festivals — deeply rooted cultural performances that carry the weight of myth, memory, and meaning. One such festival, rich in symbolism and spiritual significance, is the Behdienkhlam Festival of the Jaintia people in Meghalaya.

Festivals, in their most basic form, are moments of collective joy, shared traditions,

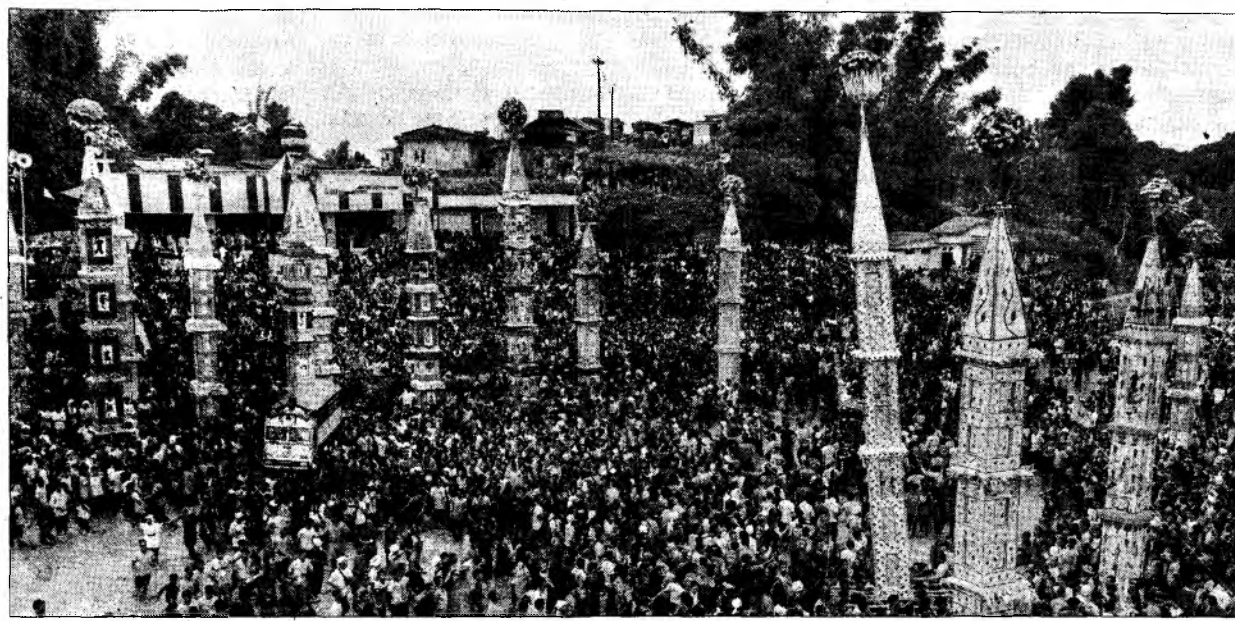
and music aimed at attracting tourists. These festivals offer employment opportunities, showcase local talent, and put lesser-known regions on the national map. However, they also raise concerns about authenticity and sustainability. It is here that the value of religious festivals becomes evident. Unlike their secular counterparts, religious festivals are not merely events; they are experiences woven into the fabric of belief systems, passed down through generations. They are not staged for visitors but lived by communities. Their power lies not in their visual splen-

(Earth). He desired to bring the Niaw Wasa to Earth to live and prosper. But Earth was barren until the goddesses Ka Bei Rymaw and Ka Bei Waboo brought soil and life to it. Only then could the Niaw Wasa settle and thrive. During a Divine Assembly (Dorbar Blai), God bestowed upon them the laws of life — the principles of Niamtre, the indigenous religion of the Jaintias. He promised to visit them once a year, asking only for a dance in return — a gesture of joy, gratitude, and connection. That promise lives on in the Behdienkhlam Festival.

the sacred leaders known as Ki Khatso Wasan. The festival thus functions not only as a religious observance but also as a historical record, a cultural anchor, and a moral compass.

In contrast to the fleeting excitement of festival tourism, Behdienkhlam offers lasting meaning. It reminds us that festivals are not just occasions for celebration but opportunities for reflection, renewal, and remembrance. They help communities stay connected to their roots, especially in an era where globalization and modernization threaten to erode traditional ways of life.

There is no doubt that festivals can serve multiple pur-



and communal gatherings. They mark time, celebrate change, and honour both the seen and unseen forces that shape human existence. Yet not all festivals are created equal. While many have evolved into instruments of tourism and development, others remain anchored in ancient beliefs and rituals, serving as vessels of cultural preservation rather than commercial gain. The distinction between these two forms — festival tourism and religious festivals — reveals much about how we understand culture, community, and the sacred.

Festival tourism has become a popular strategy for states across India to promote regional heritage while boosting local economies. Events like the Monolith Festival, Autumn Festival or Cherry Blossom Festival et al in Meghalaya are grandly organized affairs, complete with government sponsorship, elaborate stage setups, and vibrant displays of dance

dour alone, but in their ability to connect people with their ancestors, their gods, and their land.

The Behdienkhlam Festival, celebrated by the Jaintias of Meghalaya, exemplifies this kind of deep-rooted celebration. It is more than a festival; it is a retelling of origin myths, a reaffirmation of faith, and a ritual enactment of divine promises. At its heart lies the story of U Syiem Lakriah and the descent of the Niaw Wasa (Seven Huts) from heaven to earth via the golden ladder known as Ka Tangnoob Tangri. This mythological narrative is not simply a tale told around fires; it is the foundation of the Jaintia worldview, encapsulating their understanding of creation, morality, and the relationship between the divine and the earthly.

According to the legend, God U Tre Kiroi created the universe in three layers — Soorkep (the heavens), Bneiñ (the middle realm), and Sla Khyndaw Pyrthai

Celebrated during the monsoon season after sowing, Behdienkhlam carries agricultural significance as well. It includes rituals to ward off evil spirits, ensure good harvests, and protect the community from natural calamities. Offerings are made to ancestral spirits and deities, symbolizing a continuous dialogue between the living and the divine. Ritual food is prepared and shared, not just as nourishment but as a symbolic bridge between worlds. The dances, chants, and processions are not mere entertainment — they are acts of devotion, reenactments of divine encounters, and affirmations of communal identity.

What makes Behdienkhlam particularly powerful is its role in preserving the kinship structures and spiritual values of the Jaintia people. It is during this festival that the emergence of the Sookpoh Clan — the founding lineage of the Jaintias — is honored, along with

poses — cultural, economic, and social. Tourism-driven festivals have their place in promoting regional identities and generating income. But if we are to truly appreciate the richness of our diverse heritage, we must also make space for those festivals that speak to the soul rather than the senses. We must recognize that behind every chant, every offering, and every dance step lies a story — a story of who we are, where we come from, and what binds us together.

As the rain falls over the Jaintia Hills and the rhythmic beats of drums echo through the valleys, the Behdienkhlam Festival continues to remind its people — and anyone willing to listen — that some stories are too important to be forgotten. In honouring their gods, their ancestors, and their land, the Jaintias do not merely celebrate a festival. They uphold a legacy, breathe life into myth, and keep alive a world that, though ancient, still pulses with meaning today.

Life in the Hills: Temon Marak's Vlogging Journey into the Heart of Garo Culture

By Jairaj Chhetry

In a digital landscape flooded with filters, trends, and algorithm-chasing content, Temon Phanto Marak — a grassroots YouTuber from the Garo Hills — emerges as a quiet revolution. His channel, Temon Marak Vlogs, isn't just content — it's cultural conservation in motion.

With over 1,400 videos and 118K loyal YouTube subscribers, Temon has created more than a digital footprint — he's built a living, breathing archive of Garo life. His lens travels across hilltop hamlets, forested trails, and border villages, capturing everything from oral traditions to spontaneous adventures, offering viewers

ment — he becomes part of the story," notes a fellow content creator.

Digital Advocacy in a Tribal Context

Temon's contribution doesn't end with cultural vlogging. He is an emerging digital educator and advocate, empowering rural creators across Northeast India.

On Facebook — where he commands 66K likes and a steady stream of 19K active engagements — he shares:

- Tips on Facebook Community Standards & Monetization
- Cautionary advice about content bans and demonetization



an unfiltered taste of tribal India.

"This is the real India — thank you for showing what mainstream media ignores," writes a viewer under one of his recent vlogs.

A Mission Born of Memory

Temon began his journey with a humble mobile phone and a powerful purpose to preserve the Garo heritage before it fades into forgotten folklore.

His videos are raw, spontaneous, and deeply local. Among his visual narratives, viewers often encounter:

- Tutorials on uploading best practices
- Trend analysis through relatable reels like "60K, 28K, 50K Followers..."

His channel has become a mentorship hub, particularly for first-generation digital storytellers in tribal belts.

Audience Impact: A Quiet Cultural Wave

In the absence of a formal ranking system in Northeast India, Temon's reach still speaks volumes:

183K views on "Sohra Meghalaya Is Popular For Foggy Summer". Steady performance for "Exploring

Temon's storytelling isn't just visual — it's ethnographic, capturing the essence of tribes that history books often omit. With no filters, no glamour, and no performative polish, his authenticity strikes a deep chord. His camera becomes a mirror for tribal pride and a window for the world.

- Bamboo houses nestled in emerald jungles
- Elders sharing ancestral folktales in A'chik
- Children playing traditional games
- Unexpected moments — like a python encounter in Dobok Minoka — blending tribal folklore with real-time reportage

Temon doesn't script stories — he lives them. Through humour, local idioms, and emotional intuition, he transforms everyday village life into timeless tales.

Capturing Ritual, Rhythm, and Roots:

One of his most compelling pieces brings viewers into the vibrant heart of the Wangala Festival — a celebration of harvest, identity, and rhythm. The syncopated tribal drums, swaying dancers, and the dust rising with each beat create an atmosphere no studio could replicate.

Other standout features include:

- Border tales from Chandrapur and Gobardhan, where love stories and oral history unfold through folk songs and dramatizations
- A vivid portrayal of Matia Goalpara's ₹7 lakh fishing contest, a community carnival brimming with spirit and spectacle

"He doesn't just docu-

With Chusrang Vlog" and more.

Beyond numbers, it's the emotional connect that defines his community:

- "You're preserving our heritage with every vlog. Salute to your dedication."
- "Your channel is a treasure. I'm learning more about my roots than I ever did in school."

Ethnography in Motion

Temon's storytelling isn't just visual — it's ethnographic, capturing the essence of tribes that history books often omit. With no filters, no glamour, and no performative polish, his authenticity strikes a deep chord. His camera becomes a mirror for tribal pride and a window for the world. Each frame is a protest against erasure, a reminder that culture lives in the everyday.

The Digital Museum of Garo Identity

Temon Marak isn't chasing viral fame — he's curating a digital museum of identity. In his vlogs, viewers don't just find content — they find connection, culture, and community.

In a world sprinting toward virtual stardom, Temon stands firm, whispering through the hills:

"Storytelling still has soul."

Letters to the Editor

Need to repurpose public spaces

Editor,

There has been much hue and cry surrounding the recent relocation of the roadside hawkers and vendors from Police Bazaar. Allegations and counter allegations have been flying thick and fast. While the intention of the government may be to decongest the area and organise street vending, the current approach — cramming hawkers into tiny slots in public spaces originally intended for parking vehicles — neither addresses the core issues nor respects the dignity and livelihoods of these vendors.

The approach seems more like fire-fighting than finding a permanent solution acceptable to all. Instead, it creates new problems while leaving better alternatives unexplored. Looking at the current approach taken, there is every likelihood that on one hand precious public spaces will be lost and on the other hand the hawkers and vendors will remain where they are, i.e. on the streets.

One such alternative worth considering in Khnydailaid is the old Assembly plot. With the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly now relocated to New Shillong, the old assembly grounds stand as underutilised government land in the heart of the city. Why not explore the

possibility of repurposing it in a way that benefits everyone? Adding up odd structures in the plot every now and then is not improving the aesthetics of the area. A plan to repurpose and redevelop this plot could be looked at by retaining a portion of the historic structure as a public museum to preserve its legacy. Develop underground parking to ease the chronic traffic burden in the area. Use one level to create a well-organised, hawkers' market — offering a proper space for vendors and convenience for the public. All the hawkers of Khnydailaid can be easily accommodated here. The rooftop could be transformed into a green urban space, offering a much-needed breathing space in the city center not just for the locals but tourists alike.

A design contest to get the best possible option could be explored. Similar approach could be explored for other localities of the city. This is just a suggestion, but one that reflects the kind of inclusive, sustainable thinking that Shillong could benefit from. It's time we move from short-term patches which take away public spaces for meeting short term goals to long-term, thoughtful solutions.

Yours etc.,
Emica Nongkynrih,
Via email

Need to Balance Op-Ed Topics

Editor,
For the last couple of de-

cadec, my daily morning fix has remained the same: swirling a cup of coffee, and twirling the pages of The Shillong Times. I scan the headlines first and then straightaway delve into Page Six. The front page provides the breadth, of what happened the previous day, and the op-ed page provides depth, from readers, writers and editors.

The Shillong Times is fortunate to not only have a wide and enlightened readership, but also avid and active contributors, who supply a steady stream of stimulating letters and op-ed pieces. I found out recently that 'op' actually stands for being 'opposite' to the editorial in the page layout. But nowadays it is mostly used as an abbreviation for 'opinion'.

The pressing issues of the day cover a wide variety of topics. Page Six will, or should, attempt to cover a balance of international, national, and local issues. Local issues perhaps deserve the most space and international topics, maybe the least space.

A survey of small city newspapers showed that local op-eds usually accounted for about half. Many such newspapers would prefer to have up to 90% of op-eds on local and state issues, but it is easier to run syndicated columns, than generate local content. It was widely felt by editors that focus on local matters yields more civic interest and engagement.

Meghalaya has urgent social issues, so education,

health, economic topics need to be prioritised. In recent months, we have seen vigorous debates on the state of education in Meghalaya. These editorials, op-eds and letters have shown The Shillong Times to be an ideal forum to air comments and critiques about the dismal state of education in the state. Hopefully, politicians, policy makers and academic leaders have picked up on this discourse.

In my opinion there are far too many op-eds on culture, sometimes two or three a week. For an erstwhile oral society, perhaps it is important to have written documentation of our culture, but this is more the role of anthropologists and social scientists, rather than a newspaper. The recent far-fetched fantasy account of the Khasi people served no purpose. For an op-ed writer to stray into fiction writing, is a literary leap that rarely succeeds.

In a multi-ethnic secular society, articles on religious topics need to be carefully considered. While much of the world admires certain religious leaders, and their sermons on moral issues, these could sometimes be taken as parochial. Will the recent article on Pope Leo be balanced by future op-eds on religious leaders of other faiths? Playing to the religious sentiments of the Christian population is a kind of majoritarianism.

Yours etc.,
Larisha Nongkhlaw,
Via email

Need for Democratic Reforms in the Functioning of Dorbar Shnong in Meghalaya

Editor,

In Meghalaya, the Dorbar Shnong plays a crucial role in maintaining law and order, managing local affairs, and assisting the government in governance at the grassroots level. Traditionally composed of a group of men, the Dorbar oversees the administration of the locality through its head, the Rangbah Shnong, supported by subordinate committees including the Rangbah Dong and secretaries.

However, it is deeply concerning that women are systematically excluded from active participation in the decision-making processes of the Dorbar. This exclusion contradicts democratic principles and denies half the population their rightful voice in community affairs.

Furthermore, while the Dorbar derives legitimacy and customary authority under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, it suffers from a lack of structured organization and transparent electoral processes. In many localities, the same Rangbah Shnong continues to hold office for decades, often without any proper or periodic elections. This concentration of power not only undermines the democratic spirit but also opens the door to potential abuse of authority.

Need for Electoral Ac-

countability:

To uphold democracy and prevent arbitrary exercise of power, it is imperative that:

1. Elections to the Dorbar Shnong should be conducted every 4 or 5 years.
2. No individual should hold the position of Rangbah Shnong for more than two consecutive terms.
3. All adult residents of the locality, including women, must have the right to vote and contest in these elections.
4. The District Councils must intervene to ensure the conduct of free, fair, and regular elections, including issuing guidelines or rules under appropriate legislative or administrative frameworks.

Such reforms will ensure transparency, prevent the monopolization of power, and promote inclusivity — especially of women and youth — in community governance.

This matter demands serious attention from both the State Government and Autonomous District Councils. Restoring democratic practices in the Dorbar system will not only empower the people but also strengthen grassroots governance and prevent misuse of authority. Ensuring periodic elections and term limits is vital for protecting the true spirit of democracy in Meghalaya's unique traditional institutions.

Yours etc.,
DK KharChallam,
Via email

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"The pen is the tongue of the mind."

— Horace

The Shillong Times

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SHILLONG, TUESDAY, JULY 15, 2025

Tribal Values & Corporate Practices

UNION Finance Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman inaugurated the two-day North East Conclave of the Indian Institute of Corporate Affairs (IICA), under the Ministry of Corporate Affairs, Government of India at the IIM Shillong on July-11-12 last. The theme of the two-day flagship event was, "From Ideation to Incorporation." The purpose of course is to assist in nurturing startups and infuse an entrepreneurial ecosystem across the North-Eastern region. This important Conclave was envisioned as a catalyst for innovation, incubation, and enterprise development through strategic policy discussions, institutional partnerships, and access to capital. All three are key drivers of businesses across the world. In her inaugural address Ms Sitharaman made a valiant effort to bring in the indigenous tribal values of Tip-briew, Tip-Blei (Know man, to Know God), Kamai la Ka Hok (righteous methods of earning) and Tip Kur Tip Kha (to respect the clans of both maternal and paternal sides). The Minister also spoke about native attachment to the environment and hoped that there would be a happy balance between conservation and development. It is rare for a Union Minister to spend all of four days to understand the opportunities and challenges that distant regions such as Meghalaya and the entire region face to get into the corporate bandwagon which is already deeply rooted in the rest of India. The North Eastern region has just started to come out of the shadows of militancy and dependence on government employment to launch itself into a region where corporate houses can start their ventures using local resources that have not been adequately and meaningfully utilised.

The youth of Meghalaya, many of whom have studied and worked outside the state are now looking to launch into the world of entrepreneurship. They need all the hand-holding that they can get from institutions such as the IICA. The discussions which centred around the themes (a) Incubation and innovation models (b) Funding opportunities (seed to early-stage) (c) Policy frameworks & incentives for startups (d) Entrepreneurship as a skilling & employment strategy are all very well-intentioned and much needed for the young to kick-start their entrepreneurial ventures. Having access to finance from banks entails having adequate collateral and that is a major problem. How to overcome such obstacles is where IICA comes in. Several startups without the necessary skill and understanding of policies and regulatory frameworks have led to premature closure, leading to disappointments and unpaid loans. It is to circumvent such a tumultuous journey that the IICA has come to Meghalaya.

The Finance Minister's attempts to wed the tribal value systems with corporate culture must be appreciated because she probably knows that business must be tempered with good and honest practices unlike some billionaires in this country who had made off to foreign shores with thousands of crores of rupees taken from banks and living lavishly while the good times lasted. Those are poor models of doing business and Ms Sitharaman evidently wants businesses here to take off on solid values without compromising on integrity. Hopefully this will kickstart a new culture of doing business in Meghalaya.

Letters to the Editor

VPP's challenge in Meghalaya's political landscape

Editor,
While it is true that the Voice of the People Party (VPP) currently holds a minority position in the legislature with just four representatives, Ardent Miller Basaiaimoi's recent remarks reflect more than just political bravado — they highlight a growing public sentiment of frustration over governance in Meghalaya.

The VPP leader's criticism of the NPP-led MDA 2.0 government touches on a recurring issue — the tendency of ruling coalitions to deflect accountability and rely on external advice while sidelining constructive inputs from the Opposition. It is fair to question why a Government that has invested heavily in advisors still struggles to address pressing issues effectively. However, calling for the ruling alliance to "step aside" without offering a concrete alternative or road-map may come across as more aspirational than practical.

It is also worth noting that opposition parties, regardless of their size, play a critical role in holding the government accountable and ensuring transparency. The VPP's assertion that its past suggestions have been ignored by the Government raises con-

cerns about the inclusiveness of decision-making processes and the health of democratic discourse in the state.

That said, if the VPP aims to be seen as a credible alternative, it must move beyond critique and present clear, actionable policies that demonstrate not only an understanding of the state's challenges but also a vision for addressing them. Public confidence is built not just on bold statements, but on consistent engagement, policy clarity, and the ability to inspire trust among citizens.

In a democracy, dissent and debate are essential. But so is responsibility. If the VPP is serious about taking on a greater role in governance, it must now match its rhetoric with readiness — and that includes preparing itself for the rigours of leadership, not just the privileges of opposition.

Yours etc.,
Marbiang Rymbai
Via email

Public have right & responsibility to understand

Editor,
On July 9, electricity employees and engineers across the country, including in Meghalaya, observed a symbolic token strike. The protest, coordinated under the banner of the National Coordination Committee of Electricity Employees and Engineers (NCCOEEE), sought to highlight the pressing concerns surrounding

Ailments of Urban Shillong – Steps we refuse to take to cure them

By Toki Blah

Like any other living, throbbing pulsating entity, Shillong too has a life of its own. With this comes the various ailments that afflict any living organism. Again, as in life the sudden flare-up of any particular illness may call for immediate attention but it does not in the least mean that the other ailments have suddenly dissipated. So is the case with the current hullabaloo over street hawkers. The other existing Shillong urban problems have simply receded from our minds. They however still remain and still call for attention. Lack of public transport persists and the common man is forced to resort to expensive cab fares while travelling in the city. Traffic congestion (we call them Ka Block) are getting worse by the day while our narrow streets defy all attempts at widening. Supply of drinking water remains an urban horror story. Some localities have 24x7 supply while others have to resort to buying water from private water carriers. The PHE and the SMB bicker with each other over responsibility for such lapses – a crying shame for any self respecting metropolis.

Coming to waste disposal and sanitation and the less said the better on the subject. The sad truth is that the problems have increased with the time and defy solutions. The question is why? It is not that other cities have not faced similar problems, but they have been able to formulate viable solutions. Why is Shillong then stuck with this blocked mindset? Where are the solutions? As citizens we have to ask ourselves these questions and as citizens be equally responsible for finding answers.

Time is of the essence here and we don't have time for meaningless debate on the matter. We need to cut to the chase and come to the point. The point is that Shillong lacks a viable, workable elected Urban Civic Body! Such bodies play a crucial role in the administration and governance of urban areas. They are responsible for providing essential services, managing infrastructure, and facilitating development within cities and towns. These bodies are vital for ensuring the well-being and quality of life for urban residents. The issues addressed by such bodies range from supply of potable drinking water; providing and facilitating the process of sanitation and waste management (something that is on the verge of collapse in Shillong); addressing public health which includes measures to prevent and control spread of dis-

eases; street lighting; managing urban infrastructure like roads, bridges footpaths etc; urban planning by coming up with master plans for urban development; economic development by creating employment and economic growth through the creation of markets, business zones.

Civic bodies provide and create social infrastructure through social amenities like schools, hospitals, and recreational facilities; they play a crucial role in developing and managing city transport systems. They are responsible for planning, funding, and implementing various transport solutions to ensure efficient, safe, and sustainable mobility for residents. This includes public transport infrastructure and traffic management (a sorely needed public service). Surprised? In reality, its Urban Civic Bodies and not governments that are mandated to act as the primary elected entities responsible for the day-to-day administration, planning, and service delivery in urban areas. Its basically what Shillong desperately needs. Now why Shillong is devoid of such solutions is something none have cared to explain. Perhaps the time has come to do so.

First let us examine the existence of this dilapidated, rundown and decrepit institution called the Shillong Municipal Board. Shillong Municipality was first created by the British in 1878 and the Shillong Municipal Board (SMB) was constituted in 1973. It was established under the Meghalaya Municipal Act in the same year but for reasons unknown, has remained superseded ever since. Meghalaya like Alice in Wonderland thrives in paradoxes and the reason for SMB supersession remains a mystery, buried with the bones of politicians who then took such decisions. Since then the State Government has been nominating members to the Board which is treated like a Government Department than the elected coordinating institution it ought to have been. Instead of coordinating it now competes with other Government Departments; its key role and functions delegated to the Dorbars Shnong (who, lest we forget, are yet to attain legal recognition). Hence the SMB's performance has plummeted and lost public trust and confidence.

Today SMB is looked at askance by the very citizenry it seeks to serve and who are reluctant to revive the Board or to expand it to other areas of a rapidly expanding city.

Instead the decision was taken in 1990 to create MUDA, a standalone Urban Development Authority, without any support from existing civic bodies. No wonder it too flopped; politics took over and now the KHADC has taken over in the 6th Schedule areas, whatever MUDA was mandated to perform. This is another mystery; another enigma; another paradox. Here's another public service initiative sacrificed at the altar of politics! The question to ask – is Shillong and Greater Shillong doomed forever to remain a glamorized village just because politics refuses to empower it with the institutions and amenities of a modern metropolis? More important, what makes us hesitate to enable an elected Municipal Board from reviving itself?

Most Shillongites, especially the local tribals, recoil with horror from the idea of holding Municipal Elections. Three main reasons are cited for this reluctance. First is the fear that the SMB will then be controlled by a non-tribal majority. A falsehood – since only five out of the total 27 wards are open general seats. The remaining 22 seats are reserved seats for tribals. So what's the fear? Second, there is an apprehension that Ward Commissioner elections will introduce party politics at the Dorbar level which is detrimental to the traditional practice of electing Dorbar office bearers on non-party affiliations. Again this is untrue as the Meghalaya Municipal Act itself vide Section 15-A provides that "Political parties are barred from contesting elections" and further clarifies that no person will be allowed to contest Municipal elections on the ticket or symbol of any political party. The Third reason is a bit more complicated as some Rangbah Shnong have opined that Meghalaya needs a Municipal Act of its own.

This one's a real brain-teaser. It sounds complicated because Municipal Acts of all cities all over the world invariably address the same basic urban needs. The reasoning here therefore sounds more like a cognitive impediment than a sincere appreciation of an anticipated difficulty. Perhaps it springs from the fear of the imposition of another MLA/MDC clone to lord it over our Dorbar! Now that's a genuine concern! Perhaps a Municipal Act of our own simply means the need to provide our Dorbar with a more direct role in the election and functioning of an elected Ward Commissioner.

This however should not be a hurdle as the Meghalaya Municipal Act can be amended, if need be, to help remove such fears. I know it can be done!

To clarify matters it must be stated upfront that an elected Municipal Civic Body is a special democratic institution invented to help administer and govern modern urban centres. The basic needs and requirements of all urban centres are listed in the 2nd para of this write-up and it is important to understand that these needs are usually interlinked with each other. Departments of the Government cannot on their own create the required linkage with each other. They need a coordinating agency for such interface and the Municipality is specifically designed to provide this coordination in urban governance. Secondly, urban centres of Meghalaya are composed of the traditional Dorbar Shnong running contiguous to each other with the same urban infrastructural requirements running from one Dorbar to the next. Water supply, drainage, transport and traffic control are some relevant examples for Shillong. They need to be handled and coordinated in a holistic contiguous manner not in bits and pieces by independent unrelated Government Departments. These are urban prerequisites that need to be recognized and accepted. Most of Shillong's current problems arise out of our inability or fear to accept these realities. The Dorbar need to come together under the roof of a legally recognized apex coordinating agency. The Synjuk, however emotionally popular, does not qualify but the Municipality fulfills this requirement so why not make use of it?

The main focus of this article is to remove these cobwebs that have clogged our minds for so long. Yes, let's have a Municipal Act of our own where the Dorbar can have a direct role to play. A simple tweaking of the present Act will meet this requirement. Let's get together and recognize the urgent requirements of our beloved city, the most important of which is the replacement of aging and archaic infrastructure and replace the same with modern ones. Our people deserve it so why should they be denied. Yes let's hold elections, access the provisions of the 74th Amendment and help ourselves to the required funds from the Ministry of Urban Affairs. Let the Shillong Municipal elections be Of the Dorbar, By the Dorbar and For the Dorbar. It can be done.

essential service are guided by vision and responsibility, not by haste or silence.

Electricity powers everything. Decisions about it must never be left in the dark.

Yours etc.,

Name withheld on request
Via email

Meghalaya's Poise amid Rumour and Reputation

Editor,

In mid-July 2025, an unverified social media claim of human sacrifice in a remote Meghalaya village sparked widespread speculation. The story, lacking credible evidence or official corroboration, threatened to inflame superstition and suspicion. Yet rather than spiral into panic, the situation was met with clarity, calm, and commonsense—revealing a community capable of navigating misinformation with measured resolve.

This episode echoes an earlier case involving Sonam Raghuvanshi, accused in the 2025 murder of her husband in Sohra. Following allegations and media attention, Meghalaya's Confederation of Meghalaya Social Organizations (CoMSO) publicly rebuked Sonam's family, stating their initial comments had "defamed the people of Meghalaya and tarnished the state's image as a tourist destination". The group demanded a formal apol-

ogy, emphasizing that while personal tragedies deserve empathy, imputations must not malign entire communities without proof.

That earlier response from CoMSO was not about stifling grief—it was a defence of civic dignity. They commended the swift police investigation, successful within five days, and underlined that the crime was personal, not communal. The same principle applies today: serious allegations demand serious evidence, not sensationalism.

In both cases—whether regarding ritual crime or high-profile murder—the lesson is the same: information must be verified before it is shared. Tribal traditions, indigenous practices, and local culture deserve respect—not reckless association with unsubstantiated wrongdoing.

If there is substance behind any claim, it must be revealed through proper investigation and judicial process, not conjecture or hearsay. Meanwhile, the media and public must uphold the standards of responsible reportage and active discernment. Societal resilience lies not in silence, but in fact-based dialogue.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj Chhetry
Tura

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

Predicament of Living in the border areas

By Dominic Sangma

Every time I return to my village after every few months I am confronted by some glaring transformation. It is hard to ignore this transformation without pondering upon the future consequences. But we can no longer remain apathetic because we will have to bear the aftermath of it. If we don't speak up now our villages will go to Assam.

My village Nongthymmai (Garos) lies on the Assam-Meghalaya border, under Ri-Bhoi district. Its a hillock just behind the Khanapara-Basistha Chariail Highway. During my recent visit, I observed a huge chunk of land being cut and a monstrous building being constructed. I learnt that it belonged to someone from Manipur. The construction is just beside the community forest reserve and graveyard.

The question nobody is asking is - How come people from outside Meghalaya are buying land here? Are they allowed to register the land in their names in Meghalaya? Can our Headman and the Myliem Syiemship be allowed to issue NOC for land registration? Doesn't the Deputy Commissioner of Nongpoh have any say on this? In the vicinity of villages that stretch from Killing-Um-nawe, Pillangkatta-Maikhuli to Umtrenga, lots of land is being purchased by the hill tribes of Manipur (Naga and Kuki-Zo tribes) that locals generally call "Naga" (that includes Tangkhul, Kuki, Hmar, Mao etc).

The road stretching from Pillangkatta to Maikhuli resembles a mini Manipur. It's not their fault that they bought land here. In fact it's the best investment since strategically, these are some of the best places of Meghalaya which the Government of Meghalaya has ignored much to the anxiety of the inhabitants of the border areas. These places are right next to Guwahati, and to get land at throwaway prices in these areas is a bonus for them but myopic on our part.

The Land Transfer Act of Meghalaya says- "No land in Meghalaya shall be transferred by a tribal to a non-tribal or by a non-tribal to another non-tribal except with the previous sanction of the competent authority." "Tribal" here means a person belonging to any of the Scheduled Tribes pertaining to Meghalaya. In my conversation with a Naga lady from Manipur, she claimed that tribals from other states are allowed to buy land in Meghalaya. Is this true? What does the KHADC have to say about it? I called up the local MLA and MDC, Sothones Sohtun and raised my concerns. He says, "It's more complicated than what it appears and the locals have to be cautious of selling land to outsiders." I hope he will raise this concern in the assembly and find a permanent solution to this pernicious problem.

Growing up in the border area, I know for sure that allowing non-Meghalayans to buy land in these areas is suicidal. For them, it's irrelevant whether they belong to Assam or Meghalaya as long as they're next to the biggest city of North East India because they don't hold the same sentiments as we Garo, Khasi or Bhoi do to protect the borders from shifting. Since my childhood, I have seen the border shift towards Meghalaya. The roads and fields that once belonged to Meghalaya have gone to Assam. Houses that were in Meghalaya are now getting Guwahati Municipal Council Number. The water pipes and electricity lines of Assam are criss-crossing towards Meghalaya.

When Prafulla Kumar Mahanta was Chief Minister my father lost 1,63,450 sq. ft of paddy field near Pillangkatta, to Assam. It was registered in Meghalaya in 1992. Today I can challenge that no one knows where the border begins and ends. It's an ongoing dispute that will last for a long time unless Meghalaya Government comes up with a permanent solution. From the Assam perspective they're not encroaching into Meghalaya's land; they're doing what's good for their state; they're securing their

border. But Meghalaya is not aware that it's tail is on fire because it can't feel the heat since the capital Shillong is so far away from the border and the weather is too good to bother about what's happening in the border areas.

I have learnt that the Assam Government allows its inhabitants in the border areas to register land for free or at a cheap rate to secure the border and expand their jurisdiction. Why is the Meghalaya Government not securing its own territory and enabling land registration of original and permanent Meghalayans? My late father who was one of the main persons to spearhead the fight to protect the border had always said that the best way to protect the borders is to build something infrastructure like big hospitals, some institutions, university, shopping mall, hotels etc., that benefit both the population of Guwahati and Meghalaya. This would have served many purposes. One, it would have been a permanent marker of the border; two it would have generated huge revenue to the state, third it would have generated employment for the people of this are and fourth it would have brought overall development to the state rather than concentrating only on Shillong.

Perhaps it would have been intuitive to create another district headquarter right next to Guwahati because people from this region are completely neglected. For every small work they have to travel to Nongpoh. In my village 80 % of the youth are school drop-outs and about 90 % of them are unemployed. The nearest PHC is in Byrnihat; the nearest Government College is in Nongpoh; the nearest Block is in Umling. So, if the Assam Government is ready to provide better roads, water supply, uninterrupted electricity and other amenities why should the residents of border areas resist and not avail these facilities? Why shouldn't they sell their land to outsiders. That's the predicament they face.

About 10-15 years ago people started selling their lands to upgrade their lives and for fear of losing their land to Assam. One reason why the majority of villagers sold their lands to the above-mentioned tribe is because of ethnic and religious affinity. They have bought land in every part of my village; some have bought entire hills. Within a short span of time the demography of this area has completely changed. Pillangkatta- Maikhuli used to be Garo and Khasi village. Now it resembles Guwahati city and Manipur. I don't recognise the place today. There were attempts to change the names of lanes and by-lanes and they don't assimilate with our community but try to assert supremacy over the residents. I have myself faced this supercilious attitude.

The mushrooming of buildings shows that the new settlers are richer and more educated than the indigenous residents. Villagers who have sold their land and are now tenants. Surprisingly some NGOs have demanded to remove the power of the Garo Headman of the areas as if the Khasis are not involved. Without the NOC of Myliem Syiemship the new land-owners cannot register their land, so why this hypocrisy? Instead of turning everything into a Garo versus Khasi problem, let's find a lasting solution.

Tomorrow if the demand of the pressure groups for ILP is granted, where will they erect a gate for checking visitors? Jorabat? Byrnihat? Then what about this stretch of Meghalaya I am talking about? Will they cede it to Assam?

During COVID the check gate was in Umling, which means they were protecting the population of Shillong and even if the residents of these areas had to go to Nongpoh they were not allowed to enter this part of Meghalaya saying we came from Assam. This attitude of Meghalaya beyond Byrnihat will give away the best part of the state.

(The writer is a Film-maker)

"He who is brave is free."

— Lucius Annaeus Seneca

The Shillong Times

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Suicide in Balasore

THE suicide, or self-immolation, of a girl student at a private autonomous college in Balasore, Odisha has come as a huge shock to the academic community and the people at large. The self-immolation outside the Fakir Mohan College gate took place after the 22-year-old's complaints about sexual harassment and academic manipulation by the head of the B.Ed department failed to wake up the higher authorities up or stir them up to take punitive action against the perpetrators. Hints are that more faculty members were involved in the harassment. The arrest of the main accused and suspension of the principal came only after the grim suicide attempt, apparently under the pressure of the snowballing public anger over what went wrong at the college. Notably, the heat of the sensational and abhorrent rape incident at the South Calcutta Law College, last month, which involved a student leader linked to the ruling Trinamool Congress, is yet to die down. Put together, the higher education sector across the country is a state of shock and disbelief. Sexual harassment of a similar nature, involving also some loosely-run managements in the private college education sector, are said to be quite common. A lack of positive response from the college authorities and even their attempts at saving the accused by virtue of their influence are more shocking and highly condemnable. The suspension of a principal or the arrest of the faculty by itself would not be enough. Chances are that they get back to their roles after a while by claiming innocence as and when the protests die down.

The higher education sector in the country has undergone massive transformation in recent decades, with the private sector increasingly digging in, starting colleges, charging high fees, and not necessarily adhering to the ethics of higher education. The UGC itself might not necessarily have much of a say in disciplining these managements, also because many of these colleges, or even autonomous universities, have been started and run by influential politicians or their sidekicks. The established, government-run universities themselves have lost much of their reputation in recent years due to lack of effective oversight by the UGC. Many private colleges are employing a whole lot of temporary lecturers, labelling them assistant professors and paying them a pittance as salaries even while the UGC-prescribed salaries for regular teachers have risen in recent decades to fancy levels. Flushed with funds, teachers are losing their interest in academic pursuits, and instead are more keen on enjoying their lives. All these are having adverse effects on the higher education sector, evident in the fact that there's hardly any Indian university or higher education institution that figures in the first 100 among the world's best.

The land of Nalanda and Takshashila, universities of yore that excelled in scholastic pursuits, have ended up in such a pass. The general fall in both standards and professional upkeep is reflected amply in the situations as unfolded in Balasore, the educational hub of north-Odisha region.

Debate on Street Vendors in Shillong: Deliberate Distortions or Honest Debate?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Lyzander Sohkhlet's latest response to my letter alleging that he misquoted the law confirms my suspicion about him trying to mislead the public on the street vendors and drum up resentment against them. But I also realize that he is highly misinformed on some issues, and he uses this misinformation to mislead the public. It's a concoction which is highly worrying.

First of all, he says that "Mr. Mawroh's claim that there is 'no subsection (1)' is incorrect. While the Act may not use numeric subsection labels in the traditional way (1, 2, 3...), the opening paragraph of Section 10 is understood as its primary operative clause. Legal readers and drafters routinely cite the main operative paragraph as 'subsection (1)' for clarity, a common practice across Indian legislation". In the Act, there is the preceding section 9: Validity and renewal of certificate of vending, which has two subsections (1) and (2) that are clearly labelled. Section 10 has two paragraphs but is not numbered. By his logic, if you don't label the first paragraph of the Act, it automatically becomes subsection (1), the second paragraph of section 10, then subsection (2). Is this really what he's trying to say? So, why number the sections at all? Doesn't that make it redundant? It appears that while writing his article, he came across the section he needed to back his argument. So, he used the paragraph out of context and made an error. This appears a trivial issue, and it actually is trivial if one admits making a mistake. But instead of admitting that mistakes can happen, he has doubled down on it which proves that he will claim anything just to get what he wants.

Lyzander also talks about the May 2025 judgment — Malkit Singh vs. the State of UT Chandigarh and others, which reiterates that while street vending is a protected trade, it is not unregulated. There is complete agreement on this and that's why one has the 2014 Act which legalises the trade and puts the legal framework under which it should be conducted. This Act clearly states that no vendor can be evicted or relocated to a different location till the in-situ survey is done and given vending certificates by the Town Vending Committee which is to have elected

members from the street vendors who should make up not less than 40% of the committee. TVC will then formulate the plan for street vending by designated vending zones. If relocation is needed after the designation of vending zones, section 38 (zb) clearly states the relocation principle. Lyzander seems to have overlooked or deliberately ignored this particular section, considering his defense of the government's relocation plan. Since he should be following the news, I ask him: Have the TVC elections been held? Have all the certificates been given? Aren't street vendors complaining that the authorities gave certificates to illegitimate vendors while ignoring legitimate ones? Are authorities evicting or relocating people without



completing the due process in the Act? Some vendors agreed, but what concerns remain for those who did not, and has the government addressed these concerns according to the Act?

Lyzander should go back to the May 2025 judgment he referred to and tell us what the Punjab and Haryana High Court Judgment actually said about the street vendors in its judgment. Did it ask for their eviction? What were the illegalities that the court found unacceptable and asked the administration to look into? And he must answer these questions while answering the ones I have raised above. They are both connected. I would encourage others to check the May 2025 Punjab and Haryana High Court judgment (it is only 14 pages long); you will then see Lyzander has again tried to mislead the public by distorting the facts. The judgment actually states in paragraph 7 that there is "an elite class still following the British who look down on

those doing small businesses and treat them as if they are the mafia, or encroachers who cause chaos in commercial hubs". Readers can find the statement and reflect on why the Court said that. Also check paragraph 13 of the judgment which says "However, in a nutshell, we notice that Hon'ble the Supreme Court as well as the Act allows them to be protected seeking their eviction and no writ would lie seeking their eviction." And then read paragraph 20, which is the second-to-last paragraph of the judgment. It states: "The petition, prima facie, appears to be a motivated petition with a view to use the legal forum for evicting and destabilizing the local business of the street vendors. We cannot allow such abuse of the process of law.

The writ petition is, accordingly, dismissed with costs of Rs. 50,000 each on both the Unions, to be deposited with the Municipal Corporation, U.T. Chandigarh, for the welfare of the street vendors and their families." Readers can go and check whether these sections are actually from the May 2025 judgment or if I am making them up.

As for the traffic problem in Laitumkhrah near Nazareth, it's a recurring one and is because the road is very narrow, not because of the vendors sitting on the footpath outside the gate, not on the footpath used by pedestrians to walk. The traffic starts right from above Goraline until the traffic point. It's so bad that one cannot even move an inch. I know it because I work in the area and I use the footpath regularly. The long-term solution is not to evict the street vendors but to expand the road by getting the houses on the other side of the hospital to give up land for the purpose. Maybe Lyzander can talk to

the area's property owners to part willingly with the land, thus relieving congestion for patients and commuters. Or to have a balance, both can be done. Get the land and also evict the street vendors. In fact, he should ask the Government to take the land for expansion by exercising the power of eminent domain. They should do it for the patients and the commuters. But if one is done and not the other, then it's not about decongesting or making the roads safe — it's pure animosity against a vulnerable group.

I asked Lyzander for the specific sections from the Act which the street vendors have violated, and he provided none. Instead, he gave reference to a Punjab and Haryana High Court Judgment, which actually supports the claim of the street vendors in Shillong. It cannot be that he has not read the Act or the judgment and not understood it. In my last letter, I asked whether he was misinformed or deliberately trying to mislead people. Now it is clear that he falls into the second category I suspected, and I am truly worried. I have got my answer, and I hope the readers have found theirs as well.

One thing which I would commend Lyzander for is that he has not used the street vendors to spread communal hatred. A perception is being created that non-indigenous street vendors have populated Khyndailad and other locations, coupled with a negative view of Khasi women. Of course, like the illegal immigrants bogey, this also is a lie. And if you ask those who hold such an opinion to produce documentary evidence, they will not have any. But they will continue spewing communal hatred and making sexist remarks on Khasi women. So, I believe that there is still hope that Lyzander will take important lessons from this interaction. But if he doubles down and sticks to his arguments (ill-informed sometimes but deliberate in many), he should answer the questions I have posed. If he doesn't have any answers and tries to deflect the issue, it will not look good on him. The choice is up to him.

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

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Influencing, Reels, and a Life Lost...! She should've been swinging a racquet on court. Not ducking bullets in her own home.

She should've been serving aces, not getting served death.

But that's exactly what happened to Radhika Yadav, a young, brilliant state-level tennis player—shot dead by her own father.

Why? Because she made reels. Because she dared to want something more than just quietly obeying.

Because she dreamed of becoming an influencer. Ah, that word—influencer!

It's thrown around more casually these days than wedding confetti. No longer do children say they want to be astronauts or IAS officers. Ask a teen today what they want to be and more often than not, the reply is, "I want to be an influencer, uncle."—eyes gleaming like ring lights, confidence bouncing off their selfie sticks.

And what does that mean?

That they want to walk in slow motion with wind blowing their hair like they've stepped out of a shampoo

to shine beyond our approval.

Why are we so afraid of women excelling? Why does a confident woman unsettle so many? Is our masculinity so brittle that a daughter's confidence makes us reach for a gun?

Oh, and to the young girls and boys reading this: Yes, make your reels.

Dance your dances. Speak your truth. But let your influence go beyond algorithm and applause.

Let it be rooted in something deeper. Let the real influencer in you be someone whose life carries:

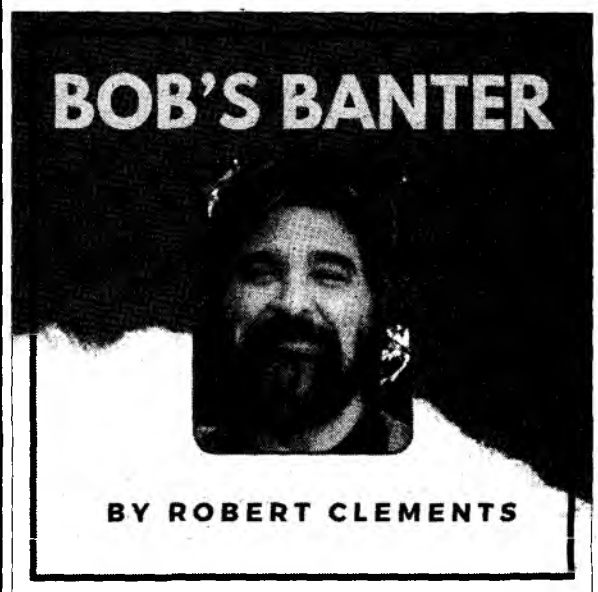
A stillness that unsettles chaos. A peace that disarms anger. A love that bridges chasms.

Because in a world of noise, it's the quietly anchored soul that stands tall.

You don't need to go viral to make a difference. Jesus never made a single reel. But He built a following that spans millennia.

He didn't endorse a brand or dance on rooftops—but people followed Him because His presence brought healing, clarity, hope. He pointed not to Himself, but to something higher.

That's the kind of influ-



BY ROBERT CLEMENTS

commercial. Or dance in parking lots while random strangers reverse their cars in confusion. Or perhaps sell makeup, do ab crunches, or give life advice... before they've even lived a quarter of one.

But before we roll our eyes and mutter something about "this generation," let's pause.

Let's look beyond the lipstick and the filters. Because many of them are not just chasing vanity.

They are chasing visibility.

In a world that only claps for toppers and tolerates the quiet ones, these reels are the kids screaming out: "Look at me!"

"I matter!"

"I'm more than my board exam marks!"

"I'm not just your daughter, I'm my own person!"

And that is precisely what terrified Radhika's father.

It wasn't the internet. It was the voice. Her voice.

A woman with a voice is still a threat in this country. A woman with a following, even more so.

She may have been a tennis champion in her school, her state—but in her home, she had no court, no game, and certainly no point. Her father didn't see a young achiever; he saw an uprising. Her reels were rebellion. Her phone, a loaded gun (ironically not the one that killed her). Her dreams, threats to a fragile patriarchal ego.

And so, he did what so many frightened men in power do—he silenced her. But let's not mistake the enemy here. The villain isn't Instagram or ring lights. It's not social media or ambition. The villain is control. The villain is fear masquerading as culture.

And let's be honest—it's not the first time. We've burnt women for loving too loudly. We've silenced them for laughing too freely. We've killed them for dancing too happily.

Oh yes, in this great land of ours where we bow to goddesses during festivals, we're quick to kill their earthly versions if they dare

encer this world still needs.

So go ahead, young one—light up the lens, but also light up hearts. Smile not just for the camera, but for the broken soul next to you. Dance not just to go viral, but to free others from fear.

And when someone asks, "What's your secret?"

You smile and say, "It's the God above."

Because a reel may get you followers. But it's love that transforms lives.

And to the rest of us—fathers, brothers, uncles, grandfathers, even those loud WhatsApp group administrators—let's get something straight: The world doesn't fall apart because women get loud.

It falls apart when men can't listen. It collapses when power feels threatened by possibility.

So instead of locking our daughters in metaphorical (or literal) cages, let's raise them with wings.

Instead of fearing their phones, let's fear our silence.

Instead of policing their dreams, let's protect them. Because for every Radhika we bury,

We bury not just a daughter. But a hope. A future. A voice that could've changed the world.

And if you're still afraid of women becoming influencers, let me tell you something more terrifying—

They already are.

Whether you like it or not. And thank God for that.

So next time you see your daughter dancing on the terrace, Don't pull her down.

Join her. Or at least applaud her.

And tell her what her father should've said: "You matter." "You shine." "And I'm proud of you."

Because true strength lies not in control. But in cheering from the sidelines—

As your daughter, wife, sister, mother or even your grandmother win...!

If you would like to receive Bob's Banter as a daily column in your WhatsApp everyday, do send your name and phone number to bob-banter@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor**Unjustified harassment**

Editor,
With reference to the letter "The Struggles of Retired College Teachers under the MDA Government," I, along with many other retired teachers, deeply resonate with the grievances cited by the author in your esteemed daily.

The Directorate of Higher and Technical Education (DHTE) appears to be staffed by officials who are not only inefficient but also seem to derive undue satisfaction from harassing elderly teachers by withholding dues that are legally owed to them. It must be placed on record that retired college teachers are not entitled to old-age pensions upon retirement. Thus, the withholding of gratuity, the enhanced gratuity differential, and the 50% Contributory Provident Fund (CPF) has led to severe financial distress.

It is important to highlight that gratuity is a statutory payment, and CPF is a joint contribution made both by the employee and the government. It is equally alarming that the Local Fund Audit takes more than ten years to identify errors in pay fixation—only to pursue retirees for refunds of overdrawn amounts sanctioned by the department itself. Cases of wrongful payment have occurred, and in many instances, the Apex Court has had to intervene to resolve the issue. In its ruling, the Court has explicitly stated that recovering excess payments made beyond five years is legally impermiss-

sible.
It is therefore both unfair and unjust for the concerned department to impose such financial burdens on retirees—especially when they are denied pension benefits.

In conclusion, I extend heartfelt gratitude to the author for bringing to light the plight of retired teachers. I fervently hope the DHTE takes cognizance of this issue and initiates meaningful steps to alleviate the suffering of those who have devoted decades to shaping the state's educational foundation.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Pedestrians' rights violated

Editor,
It was a matter of immense relief that the Hon'ble High Court of Meghalaya has in its judgment favoured the pro-active action plan adopted by the Government of Meghalaya against the inexorable mushrooming of hawkers over busy streets of Shillong, thus leading to encroachments onto the main thoroughfares of the city. Such carefree intrusion on the roads and foot-paths is nothing short of denying the inalienable rights of the law abiding citizenry to even use the assigned pathways constructed by the government, especially Khyndailad, Motphran and Laitumkhrah, to name only a few. The hawkers spread assortments of merchandise on the streets accompanied with the trademark venting to solicit potential customers

thereby raising the decibel of noises to a high pitch from morning to the nightfall. In the middle of such melee, some passersby have opined that pickpockets may have a field day.

Furthermore, a number of hawkers even before the dawn set up their makeshift structures at Khyndailad selling piping hot allurements of eatables for early travelers and leave all sorts of trash around the periphery of these standing messes, thereby compromising the inherent beauty of Shillong which has earned the sobriquet of 'Scotland of the East.'

An equally alarming case is that of Laitumkhrah, a locality which has boasted of being an educational hub of the State since the era of undivided Assam. This prime locale has been the abode of enviable educational institutions, where students, even from other states vie with one another to get themselves admitted into premier missionary run educational institutions. These days it is bemoaning to observe that the footpaths laid specifically for pedestrians' convenience are being invaded by unprecedented number of hawkers outlets specifically on the approach roads leading to the Nazareth hospital, at Police point and all along the contours leading to Fire Brigade's end.

This rampant expansion of footpath sale exhibition has inconvenienced school going children, people suffering from physical disabilities and the aged citizens as they have to skip the footpaths and are forced to walk on the motor track

endangering their lives and limbs and God forbid, ending up in fatal vehicular accidents. To exacerbate the problem, pick-pockets may see opportunities in such crowded situations. I hope the Rangbah Shnong of Laitumkhrah or the local dorbar committee will take cognizance of this societal menace which may have far reaching consequences!

Perhaps, Paul Lyngdoh as cabinet minister for Tourism, is passionate about making Shillong regain its lost pristine beauty which is why he may have yearned to place our State too at par with Sikkim where it is reported that the major portion of the township is completely divested of hawkers and the city is spick and span and free of dirt or clutter. Mr Lyngdoh must also be keenly aware of the crying need to make Shillong, nay the entire state of Meghalaya, an unblemished tourist destination for, tourism, a smokeless industry, can be the foremost economic mainstay of Meghalaya in the long run.

Yours etc
Jerome K Diengdoh,
Shillong-2

Drones transforming modern strategy in the Northeast?

Editor,
Two weeks ago, India took a bold and decisive stand in the realm of foreign policy by refusing to endorse the joint statement at

the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a move that signals our unwavering commitment to combat terrorism and uphold regional security. This refusal starkly contrasts with China and Pakistan's apparent efforts to downplay critical security issues, revealing a troubling alignment that demands our attention. A recent article in The Indian Express, titled "China Gave Pakistan Live Inputs on Indian Deployment: Top Army Officer," underscores the growing evidence of indirect Chinese military involvement in our region—an alarming development in the current geopolitical landscape. Notably, China has announced a 7.2 percent increase in its defense budget this year, elevating the official figure to over \$245 billion.

In another development, the United Liberation Front of Asom (Independent) reported a missile strike on its eastern headquarters in Myanmar, resulting in the deaths of two senior commanders. The Indian Army has categorically denied any involvement in this operation, raising critical questions: Are we witnessing a fundamental shift in battlefield awareness? Could this signal a resurgence of insurgency backed by foreign powers? The ongoing conflict in Ukraine, particularly Operation Spider's Web, serves as a stark reminder of how asymmetrical warfare is reshaping geopolitical realities. The integration of low-cost, accessible technology into military strategies is redefining traditional paradigms, and we must be vigilant, especially as the Ban-

gladeshi military employs Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 drones for surveillance along our borders.

In an age characterized by intricate checks and balances, the lack of accountability surrounding drone warfare poses grave risks that can have far-reaching consequences. A recent report by Drone Wars UK highlighted the alarming increase in military drone strikes across Africa, resulting in nearly 1,000 civilian deaths over the past three years. Furthermore, research from Fortune Business Insights indicates that the global loitering munition system market is projected to increase from USD 1.20 billion in 2023 to an astonishing USD 3.04 billion by 2030.

As India ascends to the forefront of both economic and military spheres, we are witnessing a remarkable evolution in command and control systems. This evolution empowers a wider array of actors within international relations to execute precision strikes at unprecedented distances, irrespective of their technological sophistication. Lawrence Freedman's "Strategy: A History" adeptly illustrates how game theory elucidates the complex dynamics of modern conflict, emphasizing the necessity for creative identity in navigating the current crisis in leadership.

Yours etc.,
Christopher Gathphoh,
Shillong-10

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

"Artists themselves are not confined,
but their output is."

— Robert Smithson

The Shillong Times

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Looting the Commons

THE Voice of Peoples' Party (VPP) must be commended for rising to the occasion and pointing to the serious flaws in the traditional Khasi land-holding system. Meghalaya is perhaps the only tribal state where community land and even protected forests (Law Adong) are increasingly being sold off to a tribal elite to set up their mansions since land in Shillong is now scarce. VPP Chief Ardent Basaiawmoit and his team visited the Mawpat forest where evidently some MLAs have managed to secure plots for themselves inside the protected forest. Basaiawmoit is correct in stating that ordinary citizens find it difficult to acquire land for building a home so why should special privileges be extended to elected representatives? Protected forests are also catchments on which the residents of Shillong rely for their water sustenance.

In an agreement signed in 2014, the former Syiem of Hima Myllem, Latho Manik Syiem had declared the forest measuring 1700 acres in Mawpat a "Law Adong" (Protected Forest). The forest was earlier handed over to the Soil and Conservation Department for regeneration and conservation for a 20-year period after which it was handed back to the Myllem Syiemship. In 2014 the Khasi Hills District Council and Syiem of Myllem signed a pact to conserve this forest. A plaque stating the following commitment was erected and placed in the forest but was uprooted. The plaque states, "We cannot impose our wills on Nature and man is no law giver to nature. Nature gets its power from the power of God. Nature is the living, visible garment of God. With this conviction and sense of responsibility we solemnly dedicate this forest on this day."

The plaque was put up on June 5, 2014 and the names of Ardent Basaiawmoit the then CEM, KHADC and Latho Manik Syiem, the then Syiem of Hima Myllem are prominently displayed. That a road has been constructed right through the forest without the knowledge of the KHADC — the custodian of community forests is a grave offence demanding stringent action. The team also saw other constructions inside the forest which indicate that the KHADC has not exerted its authority as a custodian of community properties for which it was elected as per the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.

Mawpat forest is located in the peri-urban area and therefore the intent to convert it to private land was detected. What about the thousands of acres of forests in West Khasi Hills where depredation is happening at a rapid pace due to charcoal burning. This is happening even as the ordinary Khasi tribal people find themselves reduced to landless tenants with no authority to turn to, to help protect their rights. Ignorance and lack of awareness is a serious disease. People believe they are born landless and don't seek help from the KHADC. The Syiems who are supposed to be the benefactors of common people are often the ones who slyly parcel off community land (Ri-Raid) to affluent tribal elites. This is happening in the New Shillong Township where an MLA/minister owns most of the land. How did the community come to this pass? And where are the protective mechanisms? The KHADC needs a wake-up call for rapid action to reclaim community forests.

Letters to the Editor

Appealing for Speaker's intervention

Editor,
It is the contention of this Open Letter to the Honourable Speaker of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly that the quality of debates in the Assembly Sessions have degenerated to such poor and substandard stuff; the silence of most legislators so deafening, that such images aired on National DD TV brings not only discomfort to the viewer but a vast sense of shame and embarrassment to Meghalaya to be depicted in such a manner before the whole nation. I sincerely hope that our elected representatives (I hasten to clarify that it is being stated with all due respect to the honourable House) cannot be satisfied with the fact that only a few familiar faces, countable on fingers of one hand are the only members with sensible questions and comprehensible answers for the public to listen to. Our chagrin and shame stems from the fact that the other MLAs remain mute or appear unable to express themselves; are indifferent to or are ignorant of the various thorny and complex predicaments faced by the state and its people. Hence this resounding shameful silence from our Temple of Democracy!

For want of space allow me to briefly list out the

important public and social issues we, the public, want our elected representatives to bring forward boldly and thrash out, through lively and meaningful debates on the floor of the August House. The Inner Line Permit (ILP) and Them Meteor issues are not the only matters of import. There are other challenges that negatively impact our society that also need immediate redressal. On the basis of priority, a discussion on "poverty" and how to alleviate it is a must. An equally distressing issue is that of our Education system and what reforms are needed to make the curriculum relevant to the needs of today. Meghalaya needs an Education Policy that is relevant to the present challenges and problem solving.

An issue that is adversely impacting our society but one that is being constantly swept under the carpet is the matter of teenage pregnancies and growing numbers of unwed single mothers! These are some of the burning issues in our state but we have yet to hear them being debated in the Assembly. Why are our MLAs avoiding discussions on such social issues however problematic they might be? I would like to believe that these are subject matters that perhaps our representatives are aware of but lack the confidence to speak on. So, they shy away from them. Can the system therefore try to help them out?

Rolls in a Democratic Buffet

By Maitphang Syiem

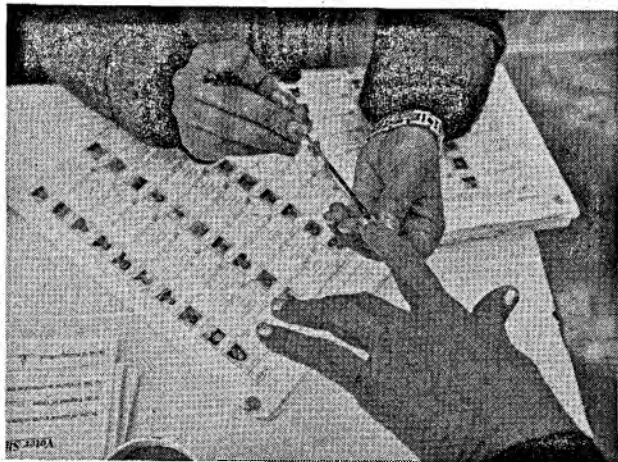
Is there anyone who doesn't relish a spicy, juicy chicken, egg roll? Well on a general note, it's inescapable. Yet as much as we savour the delectables there are other rolls that feed the democratic aspirations in a democratically spiced up country — the "Electoral Rolls". The Electoral Rolls are without a doubt vital in any democratic buffet. While edible rolls tempt our taste buds, the electoral roll is the true main course of democracy. In the context of general awareness few may really not inquire about the spices, the ingredients of the "Electoral Roll" perhaps because of dwindling interest or not wanting to educate ourselves. The irony is palpable. Everybody goes to vote but none would inquire what spices make up the "Electoral Roll."

Abraham Lincoln profoundly defined democracy as a government of the people, by the people, for the people. He clearly states that eligible citizens are at the heart of democracy, and legitimate power flows directly from them. Therefore in this context it is imperative that we keep ourselves abreast of things that are part and parcel of a democratic process. Diving more into the subject, it's fascinating to have more light on the electoral systems and its designs as well. The electoral roll is a fundamental pre-requisite to the electoral system and the electoral system defines the kind of roll management, and the party structure which complements each other. There are many electoral systems followed by the countries of the world which may not be possible to discuss here. Some are inherited and some have evolved from within. However in the context of Indian democracy we follow the FPTP (First Past The Post) system inherited from the colonial regime.

Prior to independence the electoral system and franchise was limited and restricted as it was framed to suit the colonial palette, therefore the rolls indeed were meant only for the elites. Now sarcastically saying, if we have to prepare delicious rolls there should be a fire to do so else edibility is compromised without the heat. So, technically the fire here reflects the legal frameworks. To have a better understanding history must be revisited. Back then during the colonial regime, Acts were already in place namely, the Indian Council Act 1909, and Government of India Act 1919. However the electoral scope was limited. The only significant legal provision

was that Government of India Act 1935, though limited in the nature of the electorate, also staged the comprehensive preparation of electoral rolls. It was a precursor to the post-independence electoral framework. Now after the Colonial era, the fire which lit the way for the "Democratic buffet" is part XV of the Constitution of India

a stale Chicken/Egg/Veg roll ruining our snack time resonates identically in a democracy. We certainly don't want outdated or incorrect electoral rolls messing with our right to vote. Therefore it is imperative for the rolls to be fresh, updated, and accurate with no expired names or unknown guests. It is in fact a vital recipe that ensures ev-



through Articles 324 to 329 which laid the foundation for the establishment of the independent constitutional Election Management Body, every eligible citizen gets their fair bite of democracy. As it is legally seen, the master Chef here is the ECI who is solely responsible for prepar-

"The electoral roll is a fundamental pre-requisite to the electoral system and the electoral system defines the kind of roll management, and the party structure which complements each other. There are many electoral systems followed by the countries of the world which may not be possible to discuss here. Some are inherited and some have evolved from within."

the ECI to spice up the democratic buffet. Article 324 and 327 of the Indian Constitution define the legal provisions. Furthermore Article 327 empowers enactment of laws, rules and regulations in the electoral roll context and this gave birth to Representation of the Peoples' Act 1950. The RPA 1950 further gave practical guidelines for various aspects of electoral roll management in the form of Registration of Electors Rules 1960. So, the method to cook the authentic Indian Electoral Roll is comprehensively elaborated in the Registration of Electors Rules 1960.

As reiterated earlier the "Electoral Roll" is fundamental in an electoral system which is undeniably of national interest. The electoral roll is a list of eligible electors just like the items in a menu; therefore, its freshness and authenticity are of utmost importance. To humorously say we wouldn't want

ing, seasoning and serving the fresh electoral roll. So, the question here is how is it revised? The driving force is the Representation of the Peoples' Act 1950, part III section 14 to 25 A. The execution method is defined in the Registration of Electors Rules 1960 in rule number 25 sub-rule (1) which states that the roll for every constituency shall be revised under sub section (2) of section 21 either intensively or summarily or partly intensively and partly summarily as the Election Commission may direct.

Therefore, for our consumption we can infer from the rule that there are three forms of revisions of the electoral roll and it's at the behest of the ECI (master Chef) to direct the preparation with the core principles and ingredients intact. We indeed have a large electoral base and to prepare the authentic recipe for the democratic buffet is indeed

observers throughout their 5-year term.

Yours etc.,
Toki Blah,
Via email

Will the force of law prevail?

Editor,
The Meghalaya High Court directed relocation of hawkers from Police Bazar (SMB Ward 9). On July 16, a Special Officer appointed by the High Court approved the plan to relocate vendors. The process follows a coordination meeting with the district administration and relevant stakeholders. Now the administration will proceed with the relocation of vendors as per the High Court order — issuing vending certificates to authorized sellers and finalizing the list of licensed vendors which is still pending. Only licensed vendors may operate during the 12.30 to 2.00PM and 7.30 to 9 PM time slots and vendors must avoid blocking traffic and pedestrians. Unlicensed vendors are barred from selling in Police Bazar. All hawkers will be shifted to designated vending zones once operational and new applicants may apply through formal channels.

In view of this development, it is pertinent to pinpoint that the law caps the number of hawkers in a city to 2.5% of its population. Since there is no Census data for 2021 as such

the estimated population of Shillong in 27 Wards as of 2025 is 2,07,000 which is up by 1.44 times when compared with the Census population of 2011 which stood at 1,43,229. Hence the maximum number of hawkers permissible in Shillong City (Municipal area which is 10.36 Square Kilometres or 2560 acres) is 5175 hawkers. Based on information from genuine residents residing in Ward No.9 of SMB it is estimated that population is around 1800 as of 2025. If this population is correct then as per the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 the number of hawkers permissible in Khyndai Lad (Police Bazar-Ward 9) stands at 47.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

She was there too!

Editor,
As Meghalaya observes U Tirot Singh Day each year with pride and reverence, these are the times I question why Phan Nonglail, our first female freedom fighter, remains an unsung hero in state history?

Ka Phan Nonglail was no mere footnote in the Anglo-Khasi resistance. She fought with strategy and unmatched courage alongside U Tirot Singh in the early 19th cen-

a herculean task that one cannot even imagine. However the tools are well-oiled for the cascaded kitchen brigade — the ECI and the CEO in each state; the DEOs at every District, EROs at every Constituency and the commendable prep Chefs the BLOs at the Booth levels all play a vital role in ensuring every eligible voter is served the right and healthy rolls in the democratic buffet.

In this context, recently we have witnessed that the media is rife with what is called as Special Intensive Revision (SIR). So why is there so much fuss about it? If one were to read between the lines in the RER 1960 rules it points to an intensive form of revision where the electoral roll is prepared afresh following all the recent protocols as directed by the ECI. To reiterate once again the electoral system has a symbiotic relationship with the electoral roll and the roll itself is the foundation for free and fair democracy. We cannot have a healthy democratic process if we don't have a healthy, pure and inclusive electoral roll. In short the revision process is the special sauce which keeps the kitchen of democracy rolling.

The state of Meghalaya, experienced the last intensive revision in 2005 as per the ECI's press note dated June 29, 2004, with qualifying date as 01.01.2005. Gone were those days when the roll was in paper format. One can imagine how challenging it was, but as time transcends technology became an indispensable part of the preparation and it has become easier to search, apply for corrections and also to register through a single point interface the ECI NET and for our consumption the ECI has made four qualifying dates 1st January, 1st April, 1st July and 1st October available for enrolment.

On a concluding note, all of us have a participatory role to play when it comes to the health of the electoral roll and on a sarcastic note, whether we're a fan of chicken rolls, egg rolls, or just plain democracy, the electoral roll is something that binds us all together. It doesn't care about the taste in food, the language, the religion, or background. It may not come wrapped in paper or dripping with chutney, but it's the roll that keeps the world's largest democracy rolling along. If we're eligible, we're on the list ready to take a bite out of democracy.

(The writer is a Geospatial Technology expert)

tury. Oral accounts recall her disarming British soldiers at a waterfall, an act of bold defiance that aided the Khasi forces. She reportedly led an ambush that killed over 30 British soldiers. Yet her legacy is barely mentioned in textbooks, and her name is unknown to many, even within Meghalaya.

It is only recently, thanks to scholars and movements like Maitshaphrang, that her heroism has resurfaced. A book was launched written by T. Daniel Stone Lyngdoh Nonglail, and the Ministry of Culture acknowledged her as an "Unsung Hero," but this is not enough. The absence of a state recognised day, a memorial, or any educational institutions in her name reflects a glaring gender bias in how we honour our freedom fighters.

December 6, the day she left for heavenly abode, should be declared Phan Nonglail Day. More importantly, her story deserves a place in our school course or extracurricular. Future generations must know that women, too, stood at the frontlines of resistance, with bravery, wit, and leadership.

Your's etc,
Shivani Pde,
Via email

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

Snooping: From hedge to hard drive

By Ellerine Diengdoh

Disclaimer: The people mentioned in this op-ed are not real. If you think you know them, you don't. You've just made them up in your head to match someone you know. This text is purely for entertainment purposes. Please do not use it to train an Artificial Intelligence, as it would probably just end up gossiping and asking for tea!

People today are always complaining, saying things like, "Oh no, my phone knows I bought false eyelashes at two in the morning." As if that is a problem. As if a computer knowing things is worse than a person knowing things. Which it is, I suppose, if the computer decides to tell everyone.

Honestly, I have to laugh. A computer broadcasting your secrets is just a clumsy, modern imitation of a far more efficient, low-tech system. If you grew up in

human eye-roll with airs) from Laimu. The one with lipstick. The one who wore high heels?"

By the time you were twelve, your entire life story, past, present and future, had been chiselled into stone by a committee of interfering grown-ups, who had a direct line to divine intuition.

We must not forget the land-ladies, our very own Sherlock Holmes in jinkyrshahs. Nah Suni, for instance, from her throne of a wicker chair by the window, presided over her tenants' lives. She could process data instantly... a quiet tenant suddenly playing heavy metal music, meant a break-up. A studious boy suddenly gelling his hair, meant a new crush. She knew who came home late and who left early. Who changed their bedsheets too often, or not enough. She could read

"Way back in the 80's and the early 90's, boundaries in this sleepy town were mostly metaphorical. Walls were for rich people. The rest of us had hedges. Beautiful lush misleading forget-me-not hedges, meant to mark where your patch of earth ended and another's began. But for privacy, they were utterly useless. So, they were used instead as the front line for the most tremendous, most terrifying neighbourhood spying operation the world has ever known."

Shillong you would know that being watched is nothing new. It is, in fact, an ancient art-form. Forget your silly little 'cookies', we had something far more powerful. We had Aunties and Uncles, who are like your parents' siblings, but for everyone.

Way back in the 80's and the early 90's, boundaries in this sleepy town were mostly metaphorical. Walls were for rich people. The rest of us had hedges. Beautiful lush misleading forget-me-not hedges, meant to mark where your patch of earth ended and another's began. But for privacy, they were utterly useless. So, they were used instead as the front line for the most tremendous, most terrifying neighbourhood spying operation the world has ever known.

Behind one of these hedges, you would almost certainly find a creature, let us call him Bah Po. He would be crouched down, pretending to snip at a leaf with his sparkly shears. His real job, his life's greatest mission, however, was to listen. His ears were trained to soak up every shout, every squabble and every sigh that escaped your house. He never judged. Oh no. The judging was left to his wife, his sister and the entire neighbourhood.

The church too collected its own data. Miss two Sunday services, and you'd better be on your death-bed with a certificate signed by your doctor and a sworn affidavit from the district magistrate to prove it. Because by the end of the week, the 'pastoral care team' and the 'Kongregation of concern' would show up, unannounced, but deeply concerned. "You must have been terribly unwell," they would say, with the gentle tone reserved for funerals and spiritual lapses, while peering into your face for signs of guilt or recent sin. The following Sunday, assuming you had the courage to show up, the sermon would most definitely be about the dangers of "back sliding", of "turning from the fold", of "modern temptations," and though your name was never mentioned, you could feel a hundred eyes burning little holes of shame into your very soul!

Meanwhile, the teachers at school were your own personal biographers. Late homework, strange friends, day dreaming, a whiff of biri smoke, you were done! It all went into a secret file inside their heads. "That boy," they would mutter, over tea and Mahari cake, "he's going the same way as his father. You remember him... ran off with that sming smong (a

depression by the amount of dust that collected on your veranda, and a pay raise in the spring of your walk.

In Shillong, rumours didn't spread, they bounced off walls and fences. You could pass a bowl of tungrymbai across a window and get the entire story (complete with footnotes) of someone's failed engagement, their problematic cousin in Mairang, and a mysterious visitor from Delhi, all this before the chutney cooled.

No one needed satellites, we had Kong Bih on her veranda. No one needed Wi-Fi, we had Bah Muni's ears, which were so finely tuned, they could hear a secret being thought, seven localities away!

The most terrifying part about the human ear-web, is that they didn't forget either. You could reinvent yourself in another state, or in another country, and even get a PhD in Theology, but if you came back, someone would still whisper, "Isn't that the shameful girl who wore that really short skirt to the Good Friday service in 1989?"

So, when people complain about being watched online, when they speak of tracking software and who might know what you had for dinner, I find myself terribly amused. The machines may be cold and calculating, but they're still blithering amateurs.

Bah Sil, once predicted the collapse of a marriage, because a woman in our locality got her hair done three times in one month. No one had heard the couple exchange an angry word, no one had heard a door slam, just a change in hair colour, and the man knew!

In the end, what's the difference between a glowing screen tracking you, and a grandmother who, despite her arthritis, had a sixth sense for every single thing you weren't supposed to be doing? We've always been data. You would blink, and someone would whisper about it. You bought second-hand clothes, and someone gasped. You smiled at the wrong person, and someone started drafting wedding invitations.

So, this whole modern surveillance state isn't new. It's just less charming than what we used to have. We've simply swapped the old spies, Kong Philo and Bah Minot for Siri and Alexa. To be really honest, I miss the old lot. They may have been nosy, but at least they would show up at your door with food... well, sometimes.

"A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives."

— Jackie Robinson

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SHILLONG, FRIDAY, JULY 18, 2025

Modi-Shah Edifice

THE 2024 parliament polls showed the BJP and even its NDA alliance failing to get the people's mandate to govern the nation. The previous parliament polls were won by Prime Minister Narendra Modi with a gimmick – the surgical strikes followed by the Balakot offensive – and not necessarily by any appreciation of the government's five-year performance record. The 2029 polls are a long way away, before which there could be dramatic changes to the present dispensation at the Centre. Whether these changes would impact positively or negatively on the party is anybody's guess. Hints are that the RSS, which crafted the BJP out of the Jan Sangh in 1980, is keen on a course-correction for the saffron party. This is well-advised.

The BJP grabbed power at the Centre and in some states, in the first two decades after its formation. It built its foundations brick by brick. However, unlike in the past, the BJP is increasingly getting identified with Modi and his close chum Amit Shah, who first functioned as party chief and now as the powerful home minister. Put together, the party began losing its ideological identity. The Modi-Shah axis looked insurmountable even as government policies were dictated by the RSS from Nagpur. When Shah stepped out of the party chief's post, he installed his own man there in the person of JP Nadda. The three seemed to act in unison, but the party's stock is not rising as was evident in the 2024 LS results. While the PM retains his image, it's a moot point whether he can uplift the image of the party before the next parliament polls. With Modi attaining the age of 75 soon, his continuation by itself could look odd.

The BJP is crazy about retaining power. The party often waters down its political philosophy to win power in states. It allied with the PDP of the Mufti clan in Jammu and Kashmir to share power, but finally lost out. It is now cohabiting with Chandrababu Naidu's TDP in government, though Naidu was baying for Modi's blood and rubbishing the BJP. The party's links to rival Nitish Kumar in Bihar are to share the spoils of power. Worse, today, the BJP needs TDP and JDU badly for the central government's survival. The party lacks character. It lacks a reformative zeal. The system is turning hugely corrupt under this dispensation though ministers are not seen to be corrupt. Or, there's a veil of secrecy. Modi's investigation agencies are drawing a blank or dragging matters to ludicrous levels. The party draws its sustenance from the theatrics of the prime minister, but for how long? It has not been able to decide on a new party chief due allegedly to some loud thinking among the RSS brass, which might not be inclined to accept names proposed by the threesome in Delhi. For the BJP, there should be life beyond the Modi-Shah combine.

Letters to the Editor

Useless showpiece for the common Man

Editor,
I am writing to express my frustration and disappointment after experiencing first-hand how meaningless the so-called "Smart City" systems are for common people like us.

In the wee hours of May 24, 2025, at around 2:07 AM, my Honda Activa ML 05 AE 0842 was stolen from right outside my home in Lower Mawprem Main Road. I immediately filed an FIR at Lumdingjri Police Station and began seeking help. What followed was not justice, but a juggling between authorities, each passing the responsibility to someone else.

The Investigating Officer told me that the newly installed Shillong Smart City blue-pole camera might have recorded something – but when I asked about it, I was told it's under the control of the Dorbar Shnong. When I reached out to them, authorities said police are the only ones with access. No one gave a clear answer. Every one just raised up their hands in helplessness.

This raises serious questions. If none of these Smart City cameras work, why are they powered 24/7? Why are they mounted on massive poles with blinking lights and large boxes, pretending to monitor the streets? Are these just showpieces? Just props for publicity? What's worse is the

constant boasting of the government across digital billboards, proudly advertising "Smart City Progress," "ICCC," and "Intelligent Systems." But when a citizen like me actually needs these systems, they are useless. No access. No functionality. No accountability.

Where is our tax money going? The system doesn't work when a crime happens. The police say, "vehicles get smuggled to Bangladesh," as though that should make me give up. If they know this is happening, why aren't they stopping it? Why aren't theft rings tracked down or broken? Why are citizens expected to simply give up and move on?

The system is designed in such a way that no one seems to know who holds the authority, who gives permission, or whose responsibility it is. It is so fragmented and hidden behind procedural layers that even a genuine victim is lost in it. Thieves know this – they know that a common student like me won't be able to navigate this maze in time. By the time any clarity emerges, the answer will be the same: "It's too late, the footage has been auto-deleted."

Why does the government spend crores installing these camera systems and building an Integrated Command and Control Centre (ICCC), if at the time of real need, every authority claims, "the cameras are not working" or "we don't have access"?

Let me be honest: I've lost all hope in this system. I've done everything I could – filed the FIR, found local CCTV footage myself,

The ILP is a travel document that allows Indian citizens to visit and stay for a fixed time in the states enforcing the regime. These ILP documents differ depending on the purpose of visit, dates of visit and exit in ILP states. ILP regulates the inflow of people, enables tax collection and is related with the Sixth Schedule. ILP issued by the state can be applied online or offline.

Common misconceptions about ILP are:

1). Freedom of movement, business and residence of Indian citizens is violated - India has the best record in the world that we should take pride in, because of its excellent treatment of minorities when compared to the abhorrent treatment-policies on the indigenous minorities by nations like China, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and USA which historically still affects them. It is completely justifiable and justifiable to have an Act which protects the existence of minorities, their demography and land rights.

2). Inflow of tourists is inhibited - Our Tourism Minister had correctly cited Israel where visa acquisition takes a long time but tourists persist in their application even on rejection because of the significance of the place. People will continue to come to Meghalaya known for its beauty in India and abroad because it has both tapped and untapped natural beauty with a hospitable indigenous populace. People will line up to visit the state by filling a simplified one page or an easy to fill e-form as part of the ease of doing business and pay either online or offline, whichever is convenient for them. ILP will not affect tourist inflow at minimal tax rates, fast approval, planned and effective checking system. Rather it will document, regulate and streamline tourist inflow. Had the ILP system been in place, tourists would be deterred from undertaking insidious and malevolent activities.

3). Deters business investment - Deterrence of business-investment and joint ventures can be attributed to the fact that for 53 years Meghalaya did not have a national or international airport which multinational companies had expressed in numerous business investment summits. The Sixth Schedule and the Meghalaya Land Transfer Act (MLTA) restricts setting up of Special Economic Zones

reached out to the police, even wrote to the SP. And what did I get in return? Silence, delay, and contradiction.

So here is my sincere advice to fellow citizens: If your vehicle is stolen, file the FIR to protect yourself, but don't waste your energy chasing justice. Don't run shop to shop for CCTV footage. Don't beg authorities to act. Just do your job, pay your taxes – because while the government may do nothing for your loss, they will surely come after you if you miss paying them.

These Smart City systems are not built for us. They're built to look good on paper and on screens. Not to protect the real people who work hard to pay for them.

While I have previously requested anonymity in my letters, this time I choose to publish my name. I wish to see, as a citizen, how far one may be targeted simply for publicly questioning utter lack of accountability in the system. I believe that if common citizens continue to remain silent or hidden, nothing will change.

Yours etc.,
Ekramul Haque,
Via email

The Chickens' Necks of Bangladesh

Editor,
Assam Chief Minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma presented an interesting geographical fact about two Chickens' Neck in Bangladesh, the 80 Km North Bangladesh Corridor and the

(SEZs) in the state since land availability is a problem. The modified MLT Act was meant to facilitate land acquisition for business investment but has been aborted. If non-ILP states like Assam and Sikkim could get companies from outside to invest why has Meghalaya not been able to do the same in 53 years? An inward introspection is needed as to why no business-investments have been made by MNCs in the manufacturing - servicing sectors in 53 years rather than blame the ILP. With an effective investment policy that addresses land acquisition, skilled labour, deals for employing local youths and developed physical infrastructures the ILP will not be a hindrance for establishing businesses. It will only ensure that the right people and right institutions can enter the state.

4). Bureaucracy, staff - labour dearth and inconvenience to students - ILP grants liberty as to who can be charged for entering Meghalaya such as bureaucrats, staff, labourers and students. These categories can pay a one-time minimal amount in a year and they can traverse in and out of the state as many times as they want after making this one-time payment and with valid identity upon re-entry. For example, students can pay Rs 200 annually, labourers Rs 400 annually and for bureaucrats and other officials they should pay as per their pay matrix. Such minimal fees will not affect them, their traversing and staying.

5). Prevents assimilation & patriotism - From print, social media and general media, assimilation can be attained by learning about the history, culture and customs of India. Students and workers from our state move to study and work outside to different states of India. Similarly, students and workers from outside the state work and study here, besides the non-indigenous people who had been living in the state and are assimilated. Educational institutions contribute towards assimilation and patriotism. Patriotism is inborn, not enforced and most certainly ILP does not make us less patriotic. We have seen that people from mainland India can also be unpatriotic. To negatively attribute assimilation and patriotism with ILP is preposterous.

28 Km Chittagong Corridor on his Twitter handle on May 25, 2025, stating that he is only "presenting geographical facts that some may tend to forget."

If the former corridor spanning from Dakshin Dinajpur (West Bengal, India) to South West Garo Hills (Meghalaya, India) is snapped it would have a significant implication for Bangladesh, especially for Rangpur Division and northern districts which have a population of 17.9 million of that country's administrative divisions, covering an area of 16,709.5 Sq. Km. Northern Bangladesh, particularly Rangpur Division, could find itself isolated from the rest of the country, affecting transport and connectivity. The region depends on trade and movement through India. A separation could increase logistical challenges and disrupt agricultural and industrial supply chains.

Bangladesh's security and international relations with India would be directly impacted by such an event, leading to potential diplomatic negotiations or tensions. A sudden geopolitical shift could lead to population displacement, economic shifts and access issues for essential services.

If the latter corridor which connects South Tripura (India) to the Bay of Bengal were disrupted, it would have serious consequences for Dhaka and Bangladesh. The Chittagong Corridor is a vital link between Bangladesh's economic capital (Chittagong) and its political capital (Dhaka). If severed, Dhaka would lose direct access to Chittagong Port,

6). Act East Policy & Transit State - North East India has had no visible infrastructure for 25 years to support the operationalization of Act East policy due to policy paralysis with no land transport, inland waterways, airport and manufacturing. Nor is there service infrastructure development to support bulk exports for bolstering trade from the region to ASEAN. Hypothetical illusions that ILP will hinder the Act East Policy is a fallacy. Transitory, ILP pertains only to checking of vehicular movement in case passengers carry narcotics and firearms. This exercise may take a few minutes since there is no large X ray machine, no hand-held detection device, sniffer dogs or manual checking which resulted in our state being a destination and transit hub for narcotics. ILP will be a positive feature to check this illegal menace and will not affect the state's transit status.

7). Competition Issues & Unemployment - ILP calls for a regulated entry of skilled migrants into our state to fill up posts in private/public sectors where locals lack the technical know-how. At present, the state is plagued by unskilled and few semi-skilled labourers who compete and deprive the locals of jobs. ILP will not hinder the specialist skilled staff at NEIGRIHMS, et al but only those menial migrant labourers who take the jobs of unemployed local youths by lowering the minimal wages to below normal wage levels. ILP will not contribute to unemployment of local workers in shops, hotels or drivers who survive on tourist inflow since the tourist will continue to come because of the natural beauty with easy to fill - fast ILP processing juxtaposed with minimal tax rates.

8). Lack of Stringent Enforcement Mechanism - A robust implementing mechanism for checking, detecting and deporting the illegal immigrants is important. A cut off year for deportation must be put in place. Corrupt individuals who grant ILP documents without following the ILP protocol must be punished by a law designed for the purpose. The problem will not arise if the majority 90% of illegal migrants are prevented entry with some being drug traffickers, although there might be illegal migrants who escape checking but can

be re-detected and deported.

Revenue Generation: The positive aspects of Direct Revenue Collection for the government have never been considered but only negative aspects have been discussed whenever the word ILP is uttered. The state earns mostly from minerals, SGST, alcohol, licenses and other minor tax revenue sources. It could enhance revenue collection from ILP post five years through methodical planning, infrastructural development and effective media promotion which can bring about Rs 90-99 crore annual income not only from tourists but all types of entrants. Manipur earned 14 crores for 5 years from ILP since its ILP introduction in 2020. Nagaland and Mizoram earned 36 and 33 crores respectively in 2024-25. Arunachal Pradesh with higher ILP tax rates attains more revenue though the exact numbers are not put out. ILP revenue could be spent for development of all tourist sites, roads or deposited in the state treasury. States have the liberty to set up their own ILP tax slabs for teachers, lecturers, businessmen, skilled labourers, tourists, bureaucrats and business partners.

Meghalaya has an edge because of its geographical location and natural beauty in North East India. ILP can be a major tax revenue instead of it being a minor tax revenue. An 800 Rs increase in car entry from a fixed rate to tourist sites will stimulate local tourist drivers' income at regulated rates and deter the latter. This is the perspective which the government should aim at to make ILP a major tax revenue in the next five years.

The time is now ripe for granting ILP since we have all the Central Institutions that we need like NEIAH, NLU, et al. The Central Government should shed all negative preconceived notions about granting ILP but engage in sincere meaningful dialogue with all stakeholders to find ways to grant ILP so as to allow railways and the entry of trains be they goods or passenger trains with effective checking mechanisms without disrupting the normal life of Indian citizens while at the same time protecting the demography and identity of the indigenous populace. This will be a win-win situation for the center to set up railways and for the state to implement the ILP.

which handles over 90 percent of Bangladesh's external trade. The logistical challenges for the northwestern part of Chittagong Division (including Brahmanbaria, Comilla, Chandpur, Lakshmipur, Noakhali and Fenil) would be cut off from southwestern part which includes Chittagong, Khagracharia, Rangmati, Bandarban and Cox's Bazar).

The strategic vulnerability is that Bangladesh would face severe difficulties in military and administrative coordination, as the corridor is a key transport and supply route. Given the recent rhetoric of Muhammad Yunus around Bangladesh's strategic position, any disruption to this corridor could escalate tension with India. This corridor is often compared to India's Siliguri Corridor (Chicken's Neck) which is even narrower, making it more vulnerable to that country. These two scenarios are purely hypothetical, but it is an interesting consideration regarding how borders shape nations, economies and daily lives.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Power woes in a power surplus state

Editor,
I would through your paper voice the disappointment we have with the power supply in our area. While we cannot speak about other localities of Shillong, but in the semi urban locality we live, in Sharing Lum, near Maw-

blei Petrol pump, we are facing daily power cuts. This is not confined to our area alone but the entire Laitkor, Mawlyngngad, and other adjoining villages which get their power through the main Station at Mawlyndep face the same problem.

These are not just the one or two hour outages, which are commonplace, but the power cuts last for as long as 10-12 hours. Consumers have little recourse except to call the complaints number, which oftentimes is off the hook, and when we do get through, the stock reply given is, "Duh ka main line" (fault in the main line). This usually means 10-12 hours of power suspension.

Workshops, construction workers, woodworking and steel fabrication units, home construction all come to a grinding halt. This "Duh ka main line," problem is very frequent. It happens twice or thrice a week, which begs the question as to how this problem is allowed to persist for so long.

One does wish that there is a system in place where the Institution/Corporation responsible for the power supply compensates the consumer if the power cut is for an extended duration. While we are proud that the State is a "Power Surplus State," we'll feel even better if uninterrupted power supply is assured to all the needy consumers.

Yours etc.,
R.I. Donn,
Shillong -21

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Delusions of Democracy

By K N Kumar

Having spent years working with the government, I have observed how India's democracy, often regarded as one of the world's most important, functions. I've seen the dedication of election officials, the energy of campaigns, and the subtle games between candidates who spend money and voters looking for it. India's ability to unite its 1.4 billion people from different languages, cultures, and beliefs through elections is truly admirable. However, I believe that despite this achievement, India's democracy faces serious challenges that could threaten its stability. With more than three decades of experience as an insider, I've reached a strong conclusion: India's democracy needs a fundamental overhaul to succeed. This article is my call to critically examine, fix its flaws, and create a system where every voice truly matters. If not, the unchecked cankers may metastasize into full-blown cancers.

India's attempt at democracy began in 1947. It was a significant step to unite everyone through voting. However, it still employs an outdated system, the First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) system, which dates back to colonial times and distorts public preference. This system gives too much power to the winners and, ironically, 'excludes' the majority. For example, in 2019, the BJP won 55% of the seats in the Lok Sabha (303/542), despite receiving only 37.77% of the votes, totalling 22.9 crore votes. In the same election, the Bahujan Samaj Party received 2.22 crore votes, nearly 10% of the BJP's votes, but won only 10 seats. In 2024, the BJP's votes increased to 23.59 crore, yet they lost 63 seats. In 2019, Shiv Sena secured 18 seats with 1.28 crore votes, while the Samajwadi Party got just five seats with 1.56 crore votes. The problem becomes even more acute when the constituency size is numerically small, as in the case of Meghalaya and other smaller states. This resembles a trick card game. When someone wins with just 31% of the vote, the remaining 69% becomes irrelevant for the next five years. The FPTP system fosters intense competition, rewarding small victories but undermining the fundamental principle that every vote should count in a democracy. In our system of elections, all votes are physically counted; however, a small number of votes ultimately carry higher weight. This is what I think is the delusion of democracy - believing in something false despite evidence to the contrary.

I will illustrate this with an example: The Attingal Lok Sabha constituency of Kerala had a total electorate of 13,96,807 registered voters as of the 2024 general election. Votes polled were 9,85,341. One Adoor Prakash won the Attingal constituency by a margin of 684 votes. The vote share of the respective parties was INC 33.3%, CPI M 33.2%, and BJP 31.6%. The winning candidate received 328,051 votes (33.29%) while the other two candidates received 6,39,146 votes combined (64.86%). Now, the irony - the candidate with just 33.29% of the popular vote is the M.P., while the votes of about 65% of the voters have zero value. This is not unusual in the FPTP system, because if we magnify this to the national level, the figures will shock us even more. Of the 63.89 crore total votes cast in the country, 40.30 crore votes (63.07%) went to parties and independents other than the BJP. And the irony, the 63% of the voters still believe that they are in a democracy, even when their votes don't count. That is delusion. This has been at the root of all problems in our country but the elephant in the room refuses to go. No one wants to discuss this issue.

To win just that many votes, candidates often resort to nearly anything: lying, bribing, threatening, or engaging in various illegal activities, some of which are too well-known to need a mention here. Election offences are rarely punished. The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) reports that the percentage of MPs facing criminal charges increased from 24% in 2004 to 43% in 2019. In 2024, out of 8,337 candidates running for the Lok Sabha, 20% — or 1,643 individuals — had criminal cases against them, and 14% (1,191) were charged with serious crimes, including voter bribery.

Elections are also very costly. The Centre for Media Studies estimates that the 2014 election cost between Rs 30,000 and Rs 40,000 crore, the 2019 election around Rs 55,000 - Rs 60,000 crore, and the 2024 election soared to Rs 1,00,000 - Rs 1,35,000 crore, making it one of the most expensive elections worldwide. Only about 13-15% of the money spent is actually reported. A significant portion of the budget is allocated to giveaways, including cash and gifts for voters, with 35% of the 2019 budget dedicated to advertising. This situation heavily favours those with wealth and power, pushing India closer to being governed by the rich.

Nevertheless, there is still hope. In the hills of Northeast India, young voters who work in distant cities like Mumbai, Bengaluru, Pune, and Hyderabad serve as inspiring examples of what democracy should be. They often sacrifice their pay and travel long distances to return home and cast their votes. They genuinely believe their votes can make a difference for their region, while elsewhere in India, the situation is less positive. In Andhra Pradesh, I once observed a mob doing a dharna at a contestant's house late at night, insisting on a higher cash per vote after another candidate had offered them a bribe, exposing a sordid episode of vote selling. In a different area, the entire town's power was switched off from 2 a.m. to 4 a.m. to let the secret distribution of cash happen. Clearly, the authorities are in cahoots. This blatant vote-buying, a stark betrayal of citizenship, shows the corrupt side of our democracy.

I worked with the Election Commission of India, serving in various roles including Assistant Returning Officer, Returning Officer, and Observer for general elections across different regions. Beyond conducting elections, I closely observed the voting process to understand how the system and society influence each other. No matter how the system is built, the character of a society greatly impacts voting; some societies seem more prone to bribery than others. This isn't just about obeying the law but also about what people consider normal and what a good democracy should look like. My experience in the western region, where citizens exhibited stronger civic values, was markedly different from that in the northern and southern regions, where persuasion and corruption were more common.

Democracy requires five essential elements to function properly: (1) a fair electoral system, (2) effective election machinery, (3) a strong judicial system, (4) an informed electorate, and (5) a truly free media. I am convinced that, as a country, we have faltered right from the beginning. I argue that the FPTP system should be substituted by proportional representation. India's elections, overseen by the Election Commission under Article 324, serve as a global model, with 900 million voters and a 67% participation rate in 2019, so the machinery on the surface is solid. But clearly, we have a lot of work to do in enlightening the electorate and freeing the media from corporate influence. Without significant reforms, Indian democracy risks becoming a hollow spectacle where people believe they are participating, but in reality, they are not. India's elections demonstrate greatness, yet the FPTP system, corruption, and civic disengagement distort its promise. This delusion should end soon.

(The writer is a former member of the IAS.)

"Mistakes are always forgivable, if one has the courage to admit them."

— Bruce Lee

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Addressing substance abuse

THE DREAM project of the Police Department in collaboration with the Lympung Ki Seng Kynthei deserves appreciation for holding an awareness programme on substance abuse in Motphran right in front of Mahari's — a crowded public space where it is supposed to have maximum impact. Experience has shown that having such awareness programmes in formal surroundings such as schools and colleges and inviting people, especially the young to such meetings is futile. The target audience — namely the substance abusers will not wish to be seen anywhere near such formal spaces. Street corner meetings have their utility because people wanting to listen to what's being spoken by trained counsellors and other concerned individuals can do so from a distance without being seen to be part of the audience. There is anonymity and that's what drug users, many of whom are led into the act by a sense of desperation want. Every substance abuser in his/her sober moments knows that the addiction will ultimately extract a heavy price but cannot get out of the addiction because the process involves being a 'resident' at a rehabilitation centre which is an expensive proposition.

As is the case in Meghalaya only families that suffer from having an addict in the family are concerned while society is not involved in the rehabilitation process. In fact there is a certain ostracization of addicts which pushes them to the edge. While the Government has tried to involve the Dorbar Shnong, these traditional institutions have stated that they do not have the wherewithal to deal with substance addicts which includes alcoholics. The reason why HIV positivity in Meghalaya is growing in numbers is also due to needle sharing which is a major reason for the spread of HIV. In states like Manipur, HIV positivity has been addressed by having drop-in centres at places frequented by young people where used syringes are dropped and new ones taken so that they stop sharing the same infected syringes. This programme was started many years ago by the United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime (UNODC) which reached out to the entire region.

In Meghalaya there is a lack of openness to discuss these human concerns because society is judgmental. This has only pushed up the numbers of HIV positive cases in the state. Sanker Nursing Home has been doing its utmost in helping substance abusers find a new lease of life but there is a limit to how many such inmates they can accommodate. As a society there is a need to work at prevention rather than in curing once the addiction has taken hold of a person. The easy availability of drugs which are transiting the state to be peddled onwards to other cities is a major cause of rising addiction in Meghalaya. Then there is a listlessness among the youth who see no hope of a viable future and quickly turn to drugs for instant gratification. Once the dependency sets in the substance abusers resort to stealing to support their addiction. Unless society rises to the occasion, a few institutions and healers will not be able to tackle the problem.

Stunning Silence on the Mawpat Forest Plunder: Whither Pressure Groups

By Patricia Mukhim

As a media person I am not ideologically attached to any political party. This vests me with the freedom to judge every political party by its ability to serve a public purpose. Sadly, in Meghalaya no political party has so far stood out for taking a public position on behalf of the citizens that voted them to represent their voices in the legislature. In this respect I salute the Voice of the People Party (VPP) for taking a stand on a crucial public interest matter — the bold attempt by those in power to parcel off the only protected forest in Shillong's peri-urban area of Mawpat, beginning from Lumshiyap area. This forest is our green lungs. If this forest goes, Shillong's populace will suffer from air pollution like the citizenry is suffering now. This forest is also our catchment. If it is turned into an urban township which is what those in power seem to want, then Shillong could well become another Bymtihat — the most polluted area in India today.

Democracy demands that citizens raise their voices on issues affecting them. It is assumed that the educated who can grasp issues that afflict or are likely to affect the future of the state and its citizens will voice out these concerns. More so, when that involves the takeover of common property resources such as forests, land and even rivers, not by the so-called 'outsiders' (read non-tribals) that the sundry pressure groups paint as the buccaneers of indigenous wealth but by the powerful tribal politically connected elite. Its tiring to hear of pressure groups voicing out regularly that they stand to "pynim ia ka jaitbynriew," (to protect the local indigenous people), but those shouts stop short of questioning the looting of resources that actually belong to all indigenous tribals who fall under the larger Khasi-Jaintia umbrella. We must therefore be grateful to the VPP for blowing the whistle on what is one of the biggest loot of common property resources — the parcelling off of the protected forest of Mawpat.

So let's take a look at the accountability factor and ask those responsible how they allowed such a serious crime to be committed in broad daylight

Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council:

As per the Sixth Schedule all forests other than reserved forests are under

the custody of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC). If the forests have been cut down and the land parcelled off to different entities — mainly the powerful tribal elite, then the KHADC must be the first respondent and give a public statement as to how this was allowed to happen. If the present VPP-led ADC is not involved in the process of parcelling out such forests to individuals then it has to follow protocols and look into the files where the proceedings of allowing such forests to be privatised is being noted. Those responsible for allowing this theft to happen must be hauled up publicly. Surely, the KHADC cannot just sit back and allow the resources that are under its watch being stolen by powerful forces, allegedly by elected representatives. If the KHADC is unable to put a stop to such thefts then what is it good for? We might as well do away with the Sixth Schedule.

Myliem Syiemship: Currently this seems to be the most problematic institution. If the former Syiem of Myliem — Latho Manik Syiem and the KHADC have signed a deal in 2014 to turn this entire forest measuring about 1700 acres into a protected forest (Law Adong) then why is that sacred trust violated? Is the present Syiem of Myliem not aware of this loot of what is a sacred trust that he is supposed to zealously guard? What does he have to say on this day-light robbery of a peoples' resource — not his, by any stretch of imagination. These forests are what our ancestors called part of Ri Raid (collective property of the people; not belonging to any single clan) and if such a thing has happened it is a deceitful piece of legislation that we are not aware of. If there was some decision taken that the entire forest belongs only to the Syiem clan then we need to approach the National Green Tribunal on this matter before this state starts to face a drought situation.

State Forest Department:

Is it not the brief, nay the sacred trust of the State Forest Department with an over-abundance of officials to conserve the forests of this state? Are those at the helm of the Forest Department blind and deaf that they have allowed entire forests to be

denuded when ordinary mortals wanting to cut a single tree that has encroached into the public road have to go through several procedures of getting the Forest Department's consent? What is the Territorial Division of the Forest Department pretending it knows nothing about this theft of forest land? What is really happening here? Is this not a collusion between the Forest Department the Myliem Syiemship and the KHADC?

What about the Dorbar Shnong?

I am mentioning this institution last of all because it is supposed to be the eyes and ears of Khasi society and to safeguard the rights of the people. The Dorbar Shnong of the areas within which the Law Adong Mawpat falls should have been the first whistle blowers when such an outrage has happened. There are several Dorbar Shnong around the Mawpat forests. Are they not concerned about the future outcomes of denuding an entire forest so that some people can make money out of the deal and powerful politicians get their dirty hands on sacred common property resources? The problem with the Dorbar Shnong and also the Syiem is that they are a law unto themselves and accountable to none. This system of impunity has to stop and the Meghalaya High Court ought to step in and intervene in a situation where all other institutions have failed the people. The High Court should step in now before Meghalaya loses every inch of its forests to a powerful tribal elite.

Will Pressure Groups speak up?

The pressure groups seem to have a single agenda of blaming the outsider (mynder) for everything that is wrong with this state and society. In this case the thieves of our common resources — the forests that are providing us clean air to breathe without which we will die, are not the outsiders (mynder) but our own powerful elite. Do the pressure groups have the will and the conscience to take up this issue on the grounds of Khasi native ethics of "pynneh pynsah ia ka mariang?" We wait and watch to see what the guardians of society do now that this loot of the commons is exposed.

And where are the faith groups?

There are so many faith groups each one holier than the other but when it comes to taking a stand on important public issues they shy away probably because the political elite belong to their congregations and are also probably their biggest funders. What's the point of preaching the indigenous value systems when these are ruthlessly trampled and nature is suffering at the hands of those very people who are the loudest trumpeters of piety; who speak of "Ka Mei Mariang" with such solemnity at public platforms but fail to address the onslaught on the same mother nature? Aren't these mere empty rhetorics? Empty celebrations of so-called socio-cultural events; vacuous songs and lyrics that sound good but have no force to stop the looting of public resources?

Slaves of GroupThink:

This is a society where people shy away from thinking as individuals. People gravitate to where the numbers are without considering if numbers alone help in deciding whether an issue is worth taking a stand against. One is shocked by the stunning silence after the forest loot was reported in all the local dailies. Perhaps the regular noise creators are shell-shocked by what happened. It's time to seek public accountability from all the institutions mentioned above. If they don't rise to the occasion they have no business to lord it over us. The Minister of Environment and Forests in the MDA Government must tell us why his Department has failed to check the biggest loot of forest land. The Syiem of Myliem must be hauled up by the District Council. The previous MDCs who allowed a road to be constructed through the forest without due permission must also be named and face punitive action.

The above actions are necessary and the people must stand together to address this loot of common resources. Look at the encroachment on the Wah Umkhrah by the moneyed class. Why is it allowed to happen? If Meghalaya does not come up with a Land Ceiling Act it will not be long before the landless will revolt and do so violently because they would have nothing to lose. Landlessness and the elite capture of land issues that need immediate intervention. Its now or never!

An Archipelago's tale

By Chiranjib Halder

When as tourists we disembark from a flight at the Agatti airstrip or from a cruise at Kavaratti, we hardly realise the quandary of an archipelago. Lakshadweep faces the peril of an impending infrastructure behemoth. India and Japan have recently agreed to transform Lakshadweep and Andaman-Nicobar into 'smart islands' bolstering their shared commitment to port digitisation and maritime security. Unlike Great Nicobar, which is in the limelight owing to its primeval rainforests and de-reservation of tribal land, Lakshadweep was largely removed from the psyche of mainland India till Prime Minister Modi's visit in 2024 and the Maldives imbroglio. Though not on the current radar, this vibrant archipelago off India's Southern coast has been imperilled by heating seas and a string of tourism projects. Despite language being a friction point and Kerala High Court's stay on replacing Mahal and Arabic under the three language formula, at 97.3 percent the idyllic islands rank second in literacy rates according to the latest Periodic Labour Force Survey.

In this economy versus ecology debate, the tourism cleft stick has upset the locals of Lakshadweep. While projects are being envisioned to provide a glimpse of the islands' lagoons up close, their impact on corals, water and fishermen remains a huge concern. A Supreme Court-appointed committee headed by former judge R.V. Ravendran, in 2014 had recommended that the No-Development Zone (NDZ) be a uniform 20 metre area from the high tide line along the coast. The remaining landmass would be developed according to the Integrated Island Management Plan. Considering the fragile ecosystem, the report also stressed that all development plans should be implemented in tandem with elected self-governing bodies. In 2021, the Lakshadweep Development Authority Regulation allowed change in land ownership to facilitate infrastructure boost and tourism.

Lakshadweep has experienced coral mass mortality induced by catastrophic climate changes, straining the accretion and buffer capacity of the reefs. In plain terms, the reefs are eroding more than they are growing. But more than the ecological damage is the human cost of these proposed water villas and lagoon leases to corporations. So, when we put up at a water villa or sea resort and savour the islander's wholesome delicacy, kilanji the impact of a 42 percent passenger fare hike on ships connecting the mainland does not strike us.

By dismantling customary resource use patterns, especially around uninhabited atolls, now earmarked for tourism projects, biodiversity and human welfare goes for a toss. In the Lok Sabha, Minister of State for Earth Sciences, Jitendra Singh recently harped on the bleaching of corals severely impacting the islands of Lakshadweep. During the Covid pandemic, islanders were united to protest against Administrator Praful Patel's unilateral infra plans and local BJP politicians had resigned en masse with various civil society groups supporting them. Home Minister Amit Shah had assured that all decisions would be taken after consulting the islands' residents and local bodies. As administrator of the Union territory, special powers to remove or relocate islanders from their property, ostensibly for development projects may be a case of institutional land grabbing by default. This implies that tourism projects considered as development grants the government unbridled powers to exploit the archipelago as it wishes.

As the tourism juggernaut moves to Lakshadweep, locals could be paying the price. The Lakshadweep tent city project disrupts the ecological sensitivity of some uninhabited islands in the

archipelago. Critics caution that unscientific activities violating the coastal regulatory zones could harm the fragile environment. The project is also threatening livelihoods of local fisher folk who depend on waters surrounding the islands. While an administrative notice states that all accreted land or land gained from sea in the island chain, is government property; for centuries, landmass adjacent to low-tide and high-tide lines, has been used by local fishermen. Coastal notifications include provisions to protect the littoral environment and the indigenous livelihoods of fishermen. It also regulates any industrial and construction activities along the coastline. Land designated for tourism projects is being acquired under the Lakshadweep Minicoy and Amindivi Islands Land Revenue and Tenancy Regulation, 1965 where natives are being evicted under the claim that the land is accreted. Due to unique land holding patterns, most locals do not have valid land documents for ages.

The islanders allege that the administration was going against the Niti Ayog report on the holistic development of tourism in the five main islands of Kavaratti, Minicoy, Androth, Kalpeni and Agatti. There even exists a Kerala High Court order that directs the Lakshadweep administration to ensure that constitutional guarantees assured to islanders are made available to them. According to Article 240 of the Constitution, the President may make regulations for peace, progress and good administration of the Union Territory. Sensing that the proposed land grab of scheduled tribe natives contravenes the above article, the affected islanders have individually filed class action suits against the Lakshadweep administration.

Most Lakshadweep residents are descendants of migrants from the Malabar Coast of southwest India who arrived before the 7th century and later converted to Islam. Although Islam is the predominant religion, elements of the original Hindu migrants' social structure, including a matrilineal kinship system and social caste groups remain. The National Human Rights Commission has also issued notices to the Secretary, Ministry of Tourism and the Administrator of the Union Territory regarding the transposition of around 50,000 locals living across various islands. Local petitioners allege that land allocated by the Malabar Collector to islanders during the British period between 1865 and 1930 is proposed to be reclaimed. As the administration and islanders await further clarity on the contentious issue, the broader implications for land rights, compensation and the socio-economic fabric of Lakshadweep hang in the balance. But the moot question that crops up and remains unanswered is, do you have enough water in the islands to afford a tourist influx and support the local population? India's only coral atoll system has three distinct parts: the open ocean outside the reef, the lagoon and the land itself. The aquifer in Lakshadweep is formed by a unique process. Rainwater seeps into coral sand, creating a freshwater layer that floats atop the dense saltwater underground. This freshwater layer is crucial for sustaining life on the islands. Excessive pumping reduces the depth of the freshwater aquifer and causes saltwater from sea to mix with freshwater. The depletion could be terrible as tourist inflow and local population increase. Pollution from diesel power plants, the only major source of electricity in the islands, also pollutes freshwater. Desalination plants on every island are the only respite for the islanders. With this kind of freshwater scarcity, one shudders at the prospect of converting Lakshadweep to Maldives.

(The writer is a commentator on politics and society.)

Letters to the Editor

What does CUET actually test?

Editor,
A Master's Degree or even Bachelor's degree is considered prestigious in most countries. It is awarded to a student who possesses advanced theoretical knowledge, critical thinking and evaluation. As a student I feel the need to address a flaw in our education system which is the CUET or the Common University Entrance Test which is mandatory for admission to undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in Central Universities.

The entrance exam based on Multiple Choice Question (MCQ) type test does not reflect a student's holistic knowledge or capacity. It's more about mugging up factual objectives or dare I say, even luck! But, pursuing higher levels of education has nothing to do with trivia or luck but more about developing intellect, questioning narratives etc. This is truer in the case of students of the ARTS stream, especially students of Literature. Literature is a subject that involves writing and critical thinking skills which cannot be tested through MCQ tests as it promotes only rote memorisation. It eliminates the key thing in literature which is deeper understanding of the subject and developing the necessary skills for the respective field. Such exams take away the ability

to think and form arguments as well as opinions and only encourage us to remember facts, nothing broader. For such subjects, essay writing or critical analysis should be the alternative form of tests because it will help the board of educators understand a student's capacity instead of admitting students blindly.

It is upsetting that universities are putting importance only on CUET scores and ignoring the marks we earned during our under-graduate studies. For three years we have dived deep into theories, movements and literary ideologies, wrote essay type tests for our semester exams, secured first division only to be discarded and overtaken (forgive my bluntness) by students who secured second division in their Bachelors Degree. Shouldn't universities prioritize our degree marks?

There are many students who secured first division throughout their Bachelors; students who even secured positions in their degrees that are now discarded because of CUET. The CUET exam has taken away opportunities from many students who performed well during their bachelors. It is illogical, a sign of regressive society and a deliberate attempt to heighten the mindset of "memorisation equals knowledge".

Secondly, the questions that are given are also useless. From being asked to arrange publications of novels in a chronological order to putting more focus on

Sanskrit instead of English Literature! Then being asked to "arrange the Nobel Prize Laureates in order of receipt." It does not in any way reflect the research acumen or even knowledge of theory. Considering that a Master's Degree is a platform and opportunity to the path of Doctorate and beyond — we feel that as students we have been scammed; that a sound education system should desire only trivial knowledge from students as a qualification.

Moreover, if the entrance exam is to be of MCQ type to further levels of education then shouldn't semester exams for both Bachelors and Masters also be of MCQ type? It would make more sense! That way we can all learn superficial facts that have nothing to do with the related subject at all, making it easier to bring down the already falling state of education in our country. It is a harsh truth that education is no longer connected to knowledge but to marks secured. The CUET exam is setting us back. The method of conducting entrance exams abroad is usually an essay type test, whereas here in our country the educational system is flawed since it calls for trivia and less knowledge or critical thinking.

Therefore, I dare to ask, where is this taking us in the future? If potential lecturers, professors are left out, who then would be our educators? It is absurd that for such an esteemed level of education we are not looking deeper

into qualification or skills. In this day and age, technology can easily grant someone a degree, easily articulate what one cannot. It has come to my knowledge that many students pursuing Bachelors and even Master's degrees turn to ChatGPT for their semester exams! These are your future lecturers! Your children's possible teachers, the society's "researchers". We are angry and frustrated that our country has failed us in many ways. Blindly admitting students without proper evaluation shows lack of respect for a student's field of study.

We do not mean, by this letter, to say that all students who have scored well in their CUET are unskilled or lack knowledge. But we only mean to address the reality of the greatest flaw in our society — that those who have secured first division, secured positions in their degree, those who could add to the research field are left stranded simply because three years of our bachelors no longer hold any worth before an MCQ entrance exam. Again, our knowledge has been reduced to memorizing superficial facts.

I urge our Education Minister to look into this matter, to weigh deeply the consequences and risks that our future holds and to think about the future of students before it is all too late.

"Rome was not built in a day but it fell in one" and I am afraid we have gotten to the falling part quicker than the building part.

Yours etc.,
A concerned student
Name withheld on request
Via email

Relocating hawkers must be Govt's priority

Editor,
The need to relocate the hawkers is imperative. With the intervention of the Meghalaya High Court it is more likely that licensed hawkers in Khyndai Lad would have to shift to designated vending zones. Our footpaths, nooks and corners and roads have become makeshift or permanent trading spaces to the point of hijacking the right of pedestrians to the footpaths. While agreeing that every individual has the right to earn his/her livelihood to make a living to feed and support their family it is also true that no one has the right to impinge on the rights of others.

What started off as a handful of hawkers setting up shop on footpaths has now become a convenient trading point for a great many of them. Now it has become encroachment. Hawkers are trespassing and making it difficult for pedestrians who often have to rub shoulders with vehicles on the streets. Alas, if something had been done right from the start perhaps things would not have escalated to the point of making us who demand our rights to footpaths and road not be judged as being less

humane and even lacking empathy.

A good start to ease the congestion at Khyndai Lad is to relocate hawkers. I had always been vocal about the need to find a designated space for them to trade freely without being disturbed or disturbing others just as I was equally apprehensive about utilising parking lots as vending zones. The ground reality is that the number of vehicles both four wheelers and two wheelers are on the rise every day. It is understandable that the more new vehicles are hitting the road the more the need for parking spaces. Yes, the state government has come up with chargeable on-street parking locations as an alternative. I am hopeful that this will help address the problem of parking spaces while also addressing traffic jams as our roads have remained very much the same in size.

To conclude, for the good of all the citizens of the town and visitors alike, hawking to the point of encroachment must be dealt with once and for all. I am hopeful that the State Government will also pay heed to the problems in several other areas of the town like Motphran, Laitumkhrah, Civil Hospital, Laban, etc that are going the Khyndai Lad way.

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

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Babies born with 3 people's DNA hailed as breakthrough but questions remain

Ten years after the UK became the first country to legalise mitochondrial donation, the first results from the use of these high-profile reproductive technologies - designed to prevent passing on genetic disorders - have finally been published.

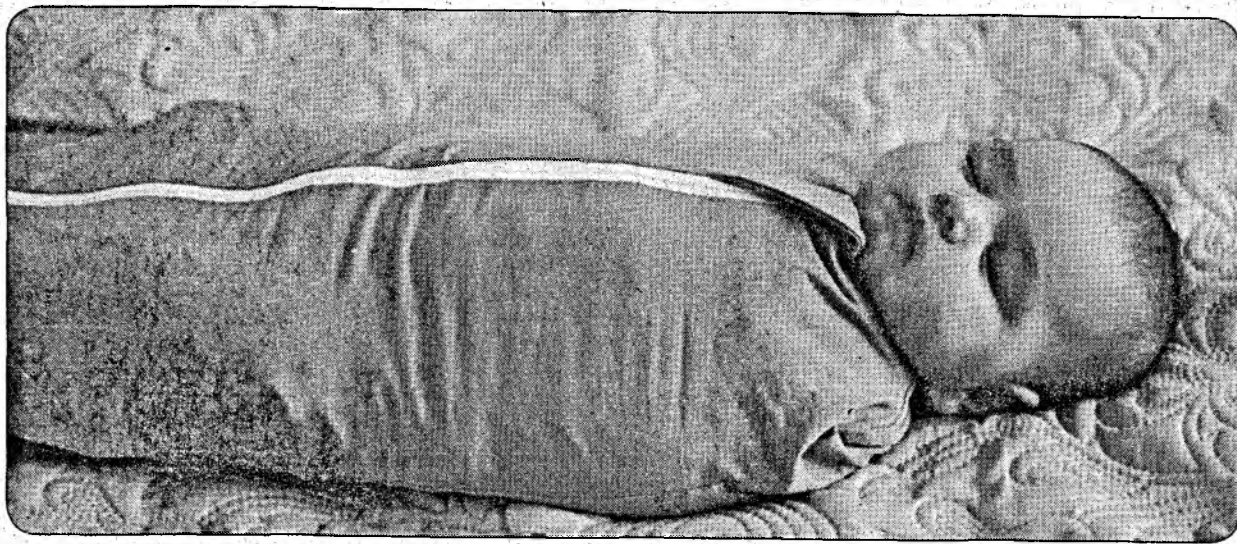
So far, eight children have been born, all reportedly healthy, thanks to the long-term efforts of scientists and doctors in Newcastle, England. Should this be a cause for excitement, disappointment or concern? Perhaps, I would suggest, it could be a bit of all three.

The New England Journal of Medicine has published two papers on a groundbreaking fertility treatment that could prevent devastating inherited diseases. The technique, called mitochondrial donation, was used to help 22 women who carry faulty genes that would otherwise pass serious genetic disorders - such as Leigh syndrome - to their children. These disorders affect the body's ability to produce energy at the cellular level and can cause severe disability or death in babies.

The technique, developed by the Newcastle team, involves creating an embryo using DNA from three people: nuclear DNA from the intended mother and father, and healthy mitochondrial DNA from a donor egg. During the parliamentary debates leading up to The Human Fertilisation and Embryology (Mitochondrial Donation) Regulations in 2015, there were concerns about the effectiveness of the procedure and its potential side-effects.

The announcement that this technology has led to the birth of eight apparently healthy children therefore marks a major scientific achievement for the UK, which has been widely praised by numerous scientists and patient support groups. However, these results should not detract from some important questions they also raise.

First, why has it taken so long for any updates on the application of this technology, including its outcomes and its limitations, to be made public? Especially given the significant public financial investment made into its development.



In a country positioning itself as a leader in the governance and practice of reproductive and genomic medicine, transparency should be a central principle. Transparency not only supports the progress of other research teams but also keeps the public and patients well informed.

Second, what is the significance of these results? While eight babies were born using this technology, this figure contrasts starkly with the predicted number of 150 babies per year likely to be born using the technique.

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, the UK regulator in this area, has approved 32 applications since 2017 when the Newcastle team obtained its licence, but the technique was used with only 22 of them, resulting in eight babies. Does this constitute sufficiently robust data to prove the effectiveness of the technology and was it worth the considerable efforts and investments over almost two decades of campaigning, debate and research?

As I wrote when this law was passed, officials should have been more realistic about how many people this treatment could actually help. By overestimating the number of patients who might benefit, they risked giving false hope to families who wouldn't be eligible for the procedure.

The safety question

Third, is it safe enough? In two

of the eight cases, the babies showed higher levels of maternal mitochondrial DNA, meaning the risk of developing a mitochondrial disorder cannot be ruled out. This potential for a "reversal" - where the faulty mitochondrial DNA reasserts themselves - was also highlighted in a recent study conducted in Greece involving patients who used the technique to treat infertility problems.

As a result, the technology is no longer framed by the Newcastle team as a way to prevent the transmission of mitochondrial disorders, but rather to reduce the risk. But is the risk reduction enough to justify offering the technique to more patients? And what will the risk of reassertion mean for the children born through it and their parents, who may live with the continuing uncertainty that the condition could emerge later in life?

As some experts have suggested, it may be worth testing this technology on women who have fertility problems but don't carry mitochondrial diseases. This would help doctors better understand the risks of the faulty mitochondria coming back, before using the technique only on women who could pass these serious genetic conditions to their children.

This leads to a fourth question. What has been the patient experience with this technology? It would be valuable to know how many people applied for mitochondrial donation,

why some were not approved, and, among those 32 approved cases, why only 22 proceeded with treatment.

It also raises important questions about how patients who were either unable to access the technology, or for whom it was ultimately unsuccessful feel, particularly after investing significant time, effort and hope in the process.

How do they come to terms with not having the healthy biological child they had been offered? This is not to say we shouldn't celebrate these births and what they represent for the UK in terms of scientific achievement. The birth of eight healthy children represents a genuine scientific breakthrough that families affected by mitochondrial diseases have waited decades to see. However, some important questions remain unanswered, and more evidence is needed and it should be communicated in a timely manner to make conclusions about the long-term use of the technology.

Breakthroughs come with responsibilities. If the UK wants to maintain its position as a leader in reproductive medicine, it must be more transparent about both the successes and limitations of this technology. The families still waiting to have the procedure - and those who may never receive it - deserve nothing less than complete honesty about what this treatment can and cannot deliver. (*The Conversation*)

Separated men 5 times more likely to take their lives than married men

Breakups hurt. Emotional and psychological distress are common when intimate relationships break down. For some people, this distress can be so overwhelming that it leads to suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

This problem seems especially the case for men. Intimate partner problems including breakups, separation and divorce feature in the paths to suicide among one in three Australian men aged 25 to 44 who end their lives. Men account for three in every four suicides in many nations worldwide, including Australia. So improving our understanding of links between relationship breakdown and men's suicide risk has life-saving potential.

Our research, published today, is the first large-scale review of the evidence to focus on understanding men's risk of suicide after a breakup. We found separated men were nearly five times more likely to die by suicide compared to married men.

What did we find?

We brought together findings from 75 studies across 30 countries worldwide, involving more than 106 million men. We focused on understanding why relationship breakdown can lead to suicide in men, and which men are most at risk. We might not be able to prevent breakups from happening, but we can promote healthy adjustment to the stress of relationship breakdown to try and prevent suicide.

Overall, we found divorced men were 2.8 times more likely to take their lives than married men.

For separated men, the risk was much higher. We found that separated men were 4.8 times more likely to die by suicide than married men. Most strikingly, we found separated men under 35 years of age had nearly nine times greater odds of suicide than married men of the same age. The short-term period after relationship breakdown therefore appears particularly risky for men's mental health.

What are these men feeling?

Some men's difficulties regulating the intense emotional stress of

relationship breakdown can play a role in their suicide risk. For some men, the emotional pain tied to separation - deep sadness, shame, guilt, anxiety and loss - can be so intense it feels never-ending. Many men are raised in a culture of masculinity that often encourages them to suppress or withdraw from their emotions in times of intense stress. Some men also experience difficulties understanding or interpreting their emotions, which can create challenges in knowing how to respond to them.

Impact on social networks

As intimate relationships become more serious, we tend to spend less time investing in our friendships, especially if juggling the demands of a career and family.

Many men, especially in heterosexual relationships, rely on their intimate partner as a primary source of social and emotional support - often at the expense of connections outside their relationship. This can create a risky situation if relationships break down, as it seems many men are left with little support to turn to. This rang true in our research, as men's social disconnection and loneliness seemed to increase their suicide risk following relationship breakdown.

So, what can we do?

There is no simple answer to preventing suicide following relationship breakdown, but a range of opportunities exist. We can intervene early, by educating young people with the skills to end relationships healthily, handle rejection and regulate the difficult emotions of a breakup. We can embed support groups and other opportunities for connection and peer support in relationship services that are regularly in contact with those navigating separation, to help combat loneliness.

Most importantly, if men come to any of us seeking support after a breakup, we can remember that time is often a great healer. The best we can do is sit with men in their pain, rather than try and get them to stop feeling it. This connection could be life-saving. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, July 20, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

A positive and proactive year lies ahead. The semi-square between Moon and Jupiter energizes your determination and helps you face challenges head-on. You'll be highly focused on completing your goals—even the most complex ones. Workplace support will increase as your sincerity shines through. Job opportunities that better match your skills and ambitions may arise, possibly leading to promotion or relocation. In business, you'll attract profitable deals and collaborations. Family ties will be loving and celebratory. Auspicious events like weddings or anniversaries may take place. Romantic relationships will deepen, and emotional bonding with your partner will be strong. Financial stability will improve steadily throughout the year.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) The planetary configuration indicates that you would be ambitious, realistic, practical and disciplined towards work and commitments. This is a time when you can be bold and enjoy new experiences. You tend to talk more readily, particularly about your own personal likes and dislikes or your past. This is an excellent time to work on intellectual tasks with more vigour and passion. You are likely to draw emotional and sensitive individuals into your social circle. At the root of this is likely to be a quest for a sense of personal freedom.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) This is a period that brings desire for love, harmony and peace in your life. Personal and professional relations are loving, stable, and harmonious. This week brings social meetings and events; and for situations that call for treating others with equality and respect. This would be a good week for financial undertakings involving electronics, technology, arts as well as group activities. Learning new things is your passion this week. You are more sensitive and your artistic imagination is stirred, and you have an increased appreciation for subtleties.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Financial benefits accrue and this week proves good in terms of investments and finances. This is the time when gifts and rewards come to you, as well as opportunities to expand your horizon through travel, a broadening of your "audience" if you have one, or higher studies. Career moves in the form of new offers could also arrive now, is a particularly auspicious period for such matters. You come across as especially articulate, and your good nature is bound to attract some attention. You are blessed with good mood and health to indulge in outdoor activities.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You would be generous, pleasantly emotional and creative. Striking a balance between your attention to career and to your family life is necessary. Taking steps to improve your family and home life as well as your career and public life will be in order. You will also thoroughly enjoy artistic, musical, or cultural events and activities, especially in the company of a loved one. This is a good time to build your skills, get organized, and attend to your health and well being. You are able to stand your ground and assert yourself more than usual.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You achieve success as you are brilliant and there is good fortune attending professional, personal and material aspects. You interact with people in position of power and authority gracefully and diplomatically. Your finances could also improve through continuous efforts and follow-ups. In love and romance your personal relationship takes on a special quality as you communicate beautifully. You have energy at your disposal to move your plans forward and you are more enterprising. Health needs care and old habits of excesses need to be discarded; this would benefit both you and your family.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 23) Self-confidence and quick action are highlighted in this phase. This is a good time to promote harmony and goodwill as you have to garner a good team spirit right now and be more tactful with your co-workers.

You need the energies, companionship, and support of other people. It can also be a time of endings and new beginnings, relationship concerns, and wistfulness. Personal and social contacts may be secretive as you don't want to disclose personal matters. There may be gains from property, shares and assets in hand.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) The planetary configuration indicates that your domestic and career needs are likely to be fulfilled. New ideas and concepts floated by you at your work place will be appreciated. At work, you may take up new assignments and projects that would bring creativity and development of new ideas. Your inner hopes and desires come to the fore even as you tackle your job with a realistic and practical purpose of mind. You extend your hospitality to family and expenses occur this week on purchasing of luxurious household items.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You are unusual, introspective and reserved this week. It is good time to organize your workplace and make it more effective and equipped with good infrastructure. This is an exceptionally exciting time as professional and business opportunities are offered to you. You are just fair and generous in family and professional situations. Health needs to be looked at; also be careful in your interpersonal dealings and avoid confrontations. Your mind is focused on private matters and past issues during this cycle. This is a time when you are least likely to speak out of turn or to express yourself freely.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You may take up assignments and projects and this would end on a winning note for you. Your mind is bright, alert, and active during this cycle, and you have the ability to come up with unusual and inventive ideas. Sharing your thoughts with others is a prime interest. Others tend to particularly enjoy your conversations during this transit—you are willing to listen as well as add your own thoughts. Your ability to grasp unusual subject matters and to intuitively understand what others are trying to say win you some brownie points. You could also do a lot of thinking and muse about your own happiness and long-term goals.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You succeed in areas that require a creative bent of mind as well as technical ability. Some of you may find that your career is moving towards a more service-oriented direction. You have more faith in general regarding your career and the direction in which you are headed. You will have the ability to build up financial reserves and resources, for this placement can bring a good deal of success in all monetary pursuits. You are able to stand your ground and assert yourself more than usual during this transit.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) The focus would be on responsibilities and workload. You want to leave your mark on the world in some way—however big or small—and you are able to make an impression more than usual. If circumstances are such, you are able to easily fight back. In fact, you may be somewhat combative under this influence, and you may have a short temper. If you've been off track, be kind to yourself, but make sure you re-commit to your personal goals. Take charge of your life, but don't bulldoze others in the process. This is an excellent transit for assertiveness and physical vitality.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This week brings for you socializing, romance and stability at the work place. Connections can be made now and networking pays off. Being part of a community or circle of friends and building your social network is important to you at this time. This is a period when practical vision may be at a high, during which you can see what needs to be done and just how to go about doing it. Career and vocational issues may benefit from the increased clarity you possess.

New discovery may hint at why universe is made up of matter and not antimatter

Why didn't the universe annihilate itself moments after the big bang? A new finding at Cern on the French-Swiss border brings us closer to answering this fundamental question about why matter dominates over its opposite - antimatter.

Much of what we see in everyday life is made up of matter. But antimatter exists in much smaller quantities.

Matter and antimatter are almost direct opposites. Matter particles have an antimatter counterpart that has the same mass, but the opposite electric charge. For example, the matter proton particle is partnered by the antimatter antiproton, while the matter electron is partnered by the antimatter positron.

However, the symmetry in behaviour between matter and antimatter is not perfect.

In a paper published this week in *Nature*, the team working on an experiment at Cern, called LHCb, has reported that it has discovered differences in the rate at which matter particles called baryons decay relative to the rate of their antimatter counterparts.

In particle physics, decay refers to the process where unstable subatomic particles transform into two or more lighter, more stable particles.

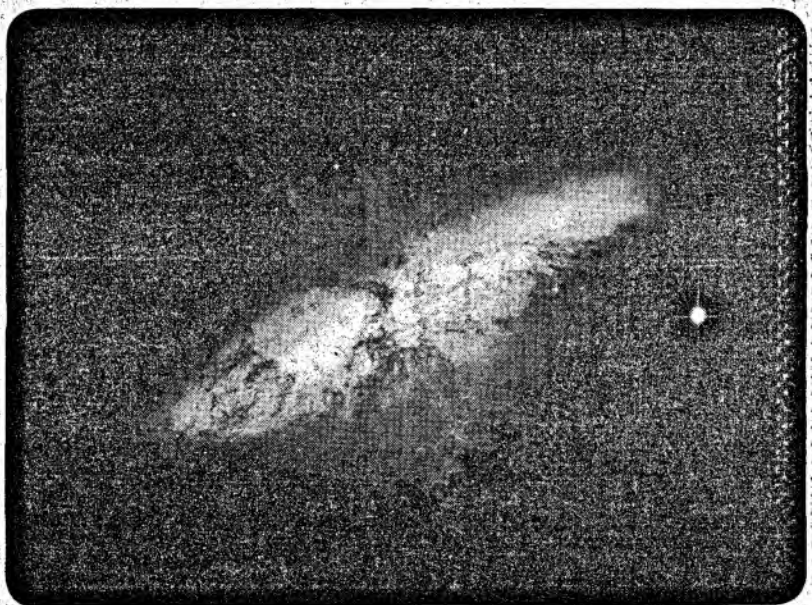
According to cosmological models, equal amounts of matter and antimatter were made in the big bang.

If matter and antimatter particles come in contact, they annihilate one another, leaving behind pure energy. With this in mind, it's a wonder that the universe doesn't consist only of leftover energy from this annihilation process.

However, astronomical observations show that there is now a negligible amount of antimatter in the universe compared to the amount of matter. We therefore know that matter and antimatter must behave differently, such that the antimatter has disappeared while the matter has not.

Understanding what causes this difference in behaviour between matter and antimatter is a key unanswered question. While there are differences between matter and antimatter in our best theory of fundamental quantum physics, the standard model, these differences are far too small to explain where all the antimatter has gone.

So we know there must be additional fundamental particles that we haven't found yet, or effects beyond those described in the standard model.



These would give rise to large enough differences in the behaviour of matter and antimatter for our universe to exist in its current form.

Revealing new particles

Highly precise measurements of the differences between matter and antimatter are a key topic of research because they have the potential to be influenced by and reveal these new fundamental particles, helping us discover the physics that led to the universe we live in today.

Differences between matter and antimatter have previously been observed in the behaviour of another type of particle, mesons, which are made of a quark and an antiquark.

There are also hints of differences in how the matter and antimatter versions of a further type of particle, the neutrino, behave as they travel.

The new measurement from LHCb has found differences between baryons and antibaryons, which are made of three quarks and three antiquarks respectively.

Significantly, baryons make up most of the known matter in our universe, and this is the first time that we have observed differences between matter and antimatter in this group of particles.

The LHCb experiment at the Large Hadron Collider is designed to make highly precise measurements of differences in the behaviour of matter and antimatter.

The experiment is operated by an

international collaboration of scientists, made up of over 1,800 people based in 24 countries. In order to achieve the new result, the LHCb team studied over 80,000 baryons ("lambda-b" baryons, which are made up of a beauty quark, an up quark and a down quark) and their antimatter counterparts.

Crucially, we found that these baryons decay to specific subatomic particles (a proton, a kaon and two pions) slightly more frequently - 5 per cent more often - than the rate at which the same process happens with antiparticles. While small, this difference is statistically significant enough to be the first observation of differences in behaviour between baryon and antibaryon decays.

To date, all measurements of matter-antimatter differences have been consistent with the small level present in the standard model.

While the new measurement from LHCb is also in line with this theory, it is a major step forward. We have now seen differences in the behaviour of matter and antimatter in the group of particles that dominate the known matter of the universe.

It's a potential step in the direction of understanding why that situation came to be after the big bang.

With the current and forthcoming data runs of LHCb we will be able to study these differences forensically, and, we hope, tease out any sign of new fundamental particles that might be present. (*The Conversation*)

"You have to dream before your dreams can come true."

—A. P. J. Abdul Kalam

The Shillong Times

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Inside Parliament

SEVERAL grave issues of national importance await discussion as the Monsoon session of Parliament starts on Monday. The pre-session meeting between government representatives and over 50 opposition leaders gave ample hints to the way the discussions would zero in on critical issues such as the Operation Sindoor, the Pahalgam terrorist attack about which Governor Manoj Sinha has himself admitted a major security lapse, the role of Donald Trump in the 'ceasefire' decision, the Ahmedabad Air India crash, the controversial electoral rolls revision in poll-bound Bihar etc. During the 21 sittings spread over a month's time, an extension of the President's rule in Manipur would also be considered. Curiously, a demand from the Opposition for a statement from Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself has not been accepted. In critical situations, the PM remains a tower of silence. In fact, the government should have called a special session of Parliament immediately after the ceasefire, but it rejected the collective opposition clamour for this. While it is generally understood that India lost the "information war" related to the Operation Sindoor, there is no clarity as to who won the military engagement that lasted just a few days. It ended abruptly with a mysterious declaration from President Donald Trump in Washington to this effect—something of the kind that had never ever happened in the history of military engagements between other nations.

The lack of security at Pahalgam where tourists were shot down in one go is a serious issue, which was further reinforced by Governor Sinha's open admission of a governmental failure. Whether there was a method in this madness is yet to be ascertained. The government's claim immediately after the ceasefire that "Operation Sindoor has not stopped but will continue" must be taken with a pinch of salt. The obvious interpretation was that the purpose of the military engagement was yet to be achieved. Latest reports say terror-mastermind Masood Azhar is back in Occupied Kashmir, preparing the ground for another attack in Kashmir. Operation Sindoor, by all practical purposes, has been put in cold storage. There has been no action thereafter. Apparently, by stating that the operations have not stopped, the government kept the nation on tenterhooks. Worse, by maintaining a pregnant silence, with no word spoken about the outcome of Operation Sindoor, Prime Minister Modi has not only done a disservice to the nation but also helped Pakistan win its disinformation war on the world stage. India's jumbo delegations of leaders sent across continents were poorly equipped. Many could not even speak properly in English. A clear statement from the Prime Minister about the outcome of the war, relayed by embassies abroad, would have better served the purpose. Donald Trump's reference to the "five" Indian fighter jets, and Pakistan's claim of downing six jets, only compounded the confusion. All these are bound to raise the temperature in the upcoming discussions. This is time for the Opposition to collectively demonstrate its will.

Strengthening the Backbone : Why Meghalaya Needs Its Own IAS Cadre

By Bijoy A. Sangma

On June 19 last Meghalaya witnessed a defining moment when Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma laid the foundation stone for the Additional Secretariat Complex in Tura. With a project cost of ₹156 crore, the state government's vision is clear: decentralise administration, improve citizen access, and bring governance closer to the people of Garo Hills. Thousands gathered to witness this milestone—one that symbolises not just infrastructure, but trust in public service and regional empowerment.

Shortly thereafter, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman visited Shillong. She commended the women-led Self-Help Group ecosystem that has created a ₹1,000 crore rural fund and noted Meghalaya's success in reducing maternal mortality. Her visit included the inauguration of projects worth over ₹1,087 crore in tourism, sports, education, digital inclusion, and women's welfare. These efforts are partly enabled by the state's effective use of ₹5,400 crore under the Centre's SASCI scheme.

These events reaffirm Meghalaya's development narrative, which is propelled by a well-defined vision, efficient cooperation between the Central government and the State, and a service-oriented governance framework.

Time to Strengthen Our Foundations

As these achievements make national headlines, an equally significant discussion is subtly developing: Is Meghalaya now capable of establishing an administrative framework commensurate with its developmental momentum?

The state's ambitions have increased, and rightly so. However, beneath this growth lies a truth we must face with humility and foresight: the administrative system is overburdened. Across departments, IAS officers manage an extraordinary number of portfolios, often 10 to 20 simultaneously! They are giving their best across a broad range of responsibilities. Their dedication is beyond doubt. Our officers are among the country's most dedicated civil servants. But no matter how committed they are, managing such an extensive workload is humanly unsustainable. The cumulative burden of files, decisions, visits, and deadlines inevitably causes delays, bottlenecks, and a fragmentation of the momentum we are working hard to build. No system can sustain excellence at this level of strain without additional support.

This is not a matter of performance; it concerns the structure. Officers, regardless of their origin, require dedicated space to concentrate, enhance their expertise, and establish continuity. In this context, the proposal for a separate IAS cadre for Meghalaya does not constitute a rejection of the current

system; rather, it affirms the necessity of this adjustment at present.

Not About Separation, But About Strengthening

When Meghalaya became a state in 1972, it continued under the Assam-Meghalaya Joint IAS Cadre, a temporary arrangement that was perhaps suitable at the time. However, more than 50 years later, the administrative complexity and aspirations of Meghalaya require an independent identity, as they now limit Meghalaya's ability to plan, allocate, and retain administrative capacity in line with its development journey.

Our neighbouring states provide noteworthy examples. Tripura and Manipur, both with similar demographic and geographical profiles, received separate cadres in 2015.

Tripura, with an area of 10,486 square kilometres and an estimated population of 4.1 million, following the establishment of a separate IAS Cadre in 2015, has built a robust cadre strength of 102 officers.

Manipur, geographically close in size at 22,237 square kilometres and demographically similar with 3.43 million people, also secured its own IAS cadre, growing its strength to 115 officers.

In sharp contrast, Meghalaya, which spans 22,429 square kilometres, making it slightly larger than Manipur, and has an estimated population of 3.42 million, still operates under a joint IAS cadre with Assam. Its current sanctioned cadre strength is 77, many of which are either vacant or temporarily managed.

What is notable is that both Tripura and Manipur previously shared joint cadre arrangements, similar to the current situation in Meghalaya. However, their decision in 2015 to adopt separate cadres was transformative, leading to enhanced administrative stability, better officer retention, and a more responsive governance framework. Despite possessing nearly identical geographical and demographic characteristics, Meghalaya is yet to undertake this transition, thereby creating a significant disparity between its expanding aspirations and the administrative capacity needed to support them.

Establishing a separate cadre would facilitate more focused planning, ensure stability in postings, and promote continuity in leadership. It will empower the system, not just the individuals within it.

Building Local Capacity, Celebrating National Service

One of the most inspiring aspects of Meghalaya's civil services is the spirit of collaboration. Over the years, IAS officers from across the country have played a vital role in shaping the state's progress, bringing diverse perspectives, rich administrative experience, and a household expenses, still waiting for the pension that was rightfully his.

This is not an isolated case. Teachers and fourth-grade staff who have served our society with dedication and dignity continue to face systemic delays in receiving their retirement benefits. Their stories frequently appear in newspapers, but rarely seem to stir meaningful action.

I therefore urgently request the Government and the concerned department to:

- 1) Expedite the implementation of the CPF scheme and ensure that the pension benefits of the deceased employee are extended to his widow on humanitarian grounds.
- 2) Establish a fast-track mechanism to ensure that all retiring Deficit School Employees receive at least interim pension orders and Gratuity within months of retirement, allowing them to meet medical and familial emergencies.

The Hon'ble High Court has already directed the State to implement the Centralised Provident Fund scheme.

steadfast commitment. Their contributions have strengthened institutions, enriched policy delivery, and supported development across departments and districts.

At the same time, there is a growing sense that enhancing local representation, particularly officers who belong to Meghalaya and possess an understanding of its social fabric, can significantly enhance this foundation. In the terminology of the UPSC cadre, such officers are designated as 'insiders'. At present, Meghalaya has only four such officers actively serving from the 'Regular Recruit' category: DP Wahlang, FR Kharkongor, Cyril V. Diengdoh, and Isawanda Laloo. These native or insider officers exemplify how cultural rootedness, linguistic familiarity, and a lived understanding of local realities can effectively complement professional administrative skills.

Encouraging more such officers is not about creating divisions; it is about expanding the leadership base and ensuring that governance is both efficient, empathetic and responsive. Their committed service serves as an inspiring example for aspiring civil servants from Meghalaya, illustrating the strength of a system that blends national duty with local insights.

MCS - A Strength We Must Harness

The Meghalaya Civil Service (MCS) constitutes the backbone of the state's administrative framework. On a daily basis, MCS officers serve as the initial responders to local issues, implement policy, and act as intermediaries between communities and government authorities.

Under the IAS (Recruitment) Rules, 1954, states are permitted to fill up to one-third of IAS cadre positions through promotion from State Civil Services. Numerous states actively utilise this provision to enhance administrative capacity, bolster morale, and recognise years of dedicated service.

In Meghalaya, the Fifth Pay Commission recommended reserving a share of senior posts for MCS officers. This recommendation is not merely administratively sound but also socially responsive.

Collaboration, Not Comparison

It is imperative to articulate that the purpose of this discourse is not to engage in comparison or critique. This is in no way a complaint against the IAS officers serving in Meghalaya. Conversely, it serves to acknowledge their outstanding dedication, frequently demonstrated under challenging conditions. The objective is to enhance our system, ensuring it embodies both the heritage of national service and the capabilities of local contributions. The path forward is not one of replacement, but rather of re-balancing to achieve

greater effectiveness and sustainability.

A separate cadre would, in fact, benefit IAS officers as well, providing them with a clearer career trajectory within Meghalaya, more manageable portfolios, and enhanced administrative capacity to support their responsibilities. Let us honour every officer who has served Meghalaya with integrity. Furthermore, let us establish a pathway whereby our youth can envision not only entering government service but advancing to its highest echelons.

A Step That Aligns With Our Momentum

Today, Meghalaya differs greatly from what it was twenty years ago. Our economy has strengthened, social indicators show progress, and our influence in national policy discussions has become more pronounced. The recent central support, such as the ₹5,400 crore under SASCI, along with the launch of several impactful projects, demonstrates both trust and collaboration.

Now is the opportunity to align our administrative structure more effectively. Possible steps include:

- Establish a separate IAS Cadre for Meghalaya.

- Review service rules to create pathways for MCS officers to advance into senior roles such as Secretaries, Commissioners, and Deputy Commissioners, similar to practices in neighbouring states like Assam.

- Enhance leadership capabilities by forming partnerships with national institutions like Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (LBSNAA), Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA), and Mission Karmayogi.

- Promote broader discussions among civil society, policy experts, and administrators to further strengthen this process.

Let Us Now Build What We Believe In

The Additional Secretariat at Tura, the SHG revolution, the digital libraries, and the infrastructure projects inaugurated this year all indicate a singular trajectory: Meghalaya is progressing. With conviction. With care. And with community at the centre.

It is now imperative to establish the foundational framework that sustains all operations: a more robust, responsive, and representative administrative system. The establishment of a separate IAS cadre for Meghalaya should be regarded not merely as a demand but as a pivotal development instrument. This initiative signifies inclusion rather than exclusion, and it is oriented towards providing greater opportunities. The future we aspire to must be supported by a correspondingly resilient and effective structural foundation.

Given the visionary leadership demonstrated by Meghalaya in recent years, there is ample reason to believe that a determined political will can facilitate its realisation.

Shillong Smart City Project a Pipe Dream

By Jenniefer Dkhar

A letter by Ekramul Haque dated July 18, 2025 made me go back to a write-up Shillong, The Smart City Project & The Main Stakeholder, The Public by Toki Blah (ST April 25, 2025) and the Shillong DDK panel discussion, aired on April 18, 2025: "DDK Straight Talk: Shillong Smart City—grand vision and ground reality". Toki Blah highlighted a sense of disappointment and anger felt by him as an elderly person, who has seen how Shillong emerged from a serene hill station to one that is moving towards a state of apathy, indifference and disinterest. The panelists in the panel discussion provided the listeners with a lot of information about what do words like Smart City mean. Once in the project, to realise the aims and goals of a Smart City is a must but it must be kept in mind that the project must be well suited for the convenience of the citizens. Here, I would agree with Toki

caused to fellow citizens. How easy and convenient it is for they don't need to pay rent but can simply start with a small thermocol carton that could transform itself into something bigger and more permanent. The need of the hour is a hawking zone for them to carry out their business, without being disturbed or them disturbing others. However, the government must find hawking zones for the hawkers in other areas as well. As of today, we look forward to having a more relaxed walk around Khyndai Lad with the relocation of the hawkers but of course at various parking lots. Well Parking Lots should be for parking and not be mixed up with hawking zones when there is space constraint. Chargeable street parking is being initiated by the government but it may not be a solution as new vehicles are hitting the road on a daily basis while the size of the roads remain



Blah and Aiban Mawkhroh's summation and belief that a smart city should be one that listens to its people and citizens, after all they are the stakeholders.

As a lay person, I share my unhappiness with the way things are happening in our beautiful city and the entire state for the people of the state matter whether they are settled in Shillong or even in the rural areas. As for the Smart City Project the question in mind is how far have we progressed?

As an ordinary citizen I wish to share the dilemma and distress that we the common people are subjected to on a daily basis. To start with, the common people have to brave the challenges of traffic jams be it during school hours or even otherwise. We are rarely blessed with a smooth ride any day, especially on a working day. A distance of 3-4 kms will have to be covered in no less than an hour and on reaching your destination you are made to face another challenge of where to park your vehicle.

Granted that owning a vehicle in the past was a luxury that was then transformed into a necessity but today it is no less than a burden. Where can you park? How concerned are those in the helm of affairs? Not as long as they do not step into our shoes and experience our daily ordeal! For them there is no traffic jam for a siren is enough to clear their way. They have no worries about finding a place to park because for them the harassment of finding a place to park or their vehicles being clamped is never an issue. Park anywhere who dares punish them. After all they are the law makers turned law breakers!

As citizens we deserve pavements and sidewalks. No one enjoys the prospect of rubbing shoulders with vehicles and the wares of the hawkers. Be it Iewduh, Motphran, Police Bazar, Civil Hospital, Laitumkhrah, etc., our pavements are no longer free and safe space for us to walk but one that will force us to either squeeze our way through or hop onto the road and tread carefully or be hit by speeding vehicles or rash riders. Hawkings are everywhere: pavements, outside shops, nooks and corners, at times even on the road. There seems to be no respite to the number of hawkers as they are on the increase setting up shops unabashedly and care-free about the inconvenience

caused to fellow citizens. The state lacks proper health care that makes many throng to hospitals outside the state. We usually rush to hospitals in Guwahati for treatment because our state has no proper healthcare. If the scenario in Shillong is grim, imagine the condition of the PHCs and CHCs in the rural areas. This is one sector that needs to be addressed in a more urgent and sincere manner. After all, besides everything else, health is the most important in a human being's life.

Ours is a beautiful hill station that today is getting recognized for its scenic beauty with tourists from within the country and outside visiting but the sanitary conditions are getting worse. Sanitary drainage systems that should be built to help maintain cleanliness and sanitation are now making way for water clogging. The roads of Shillong that had never experienced poor drainage system are now experiencing poor drainage when it rains. The slush and the filth and dirt are glaring examples of poor management of proper drainage system. True to what Toki Blah says, the rivers are now sewers. Gone are the days when the Wah Umkhrah that one read in the Khasi books in school was more pristine and crystal clear where we could actually see the small fish (shallynnal) swimming.

The Smart City concept is not a feasible concept as long as the common good of the people of the state is not kept in mind. If projects are initiated and abandoned and are left unattended then the purpose of even initiating such a move is meaningless. Thus, to achieve the target of a Smart City our state is still way off target. When the people of the state are not considered in spite of being stakeholders there will always be loopholes and blemishes. While the government is hoping for a Smart City the truth is we are far from achieving and fulfilling basic needs of the people. The attempt of enhancing and strengthening infrastructure for the comfort and convenience of its people is a mere farce for reality speaks otherwise. When ordinary citizens are brought face to face with difficulties, dilemmas and distress in their day to day lives that is a failure of governance and the collective failure of those we voted for.

Letters to the Editor

On the issue of 'Law Adong'

Editor,
Referring to the news item which appeared on July 16th, 2025 in the Shillong Times regarding the 'Law Adong' located in Mawpat, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Bah Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit and his party (VPP) for highlighting the gradual erosion of the forest over the years. Being a regular trekker in these parts for more than thirty years now, I have been a beneficiary of the clean air and serene environment that the forest has to offer. Moreover, I can also bear witness to the fact that the forest provides a safe sanctuary for the crows and variety of bird species that have all but disappeared from other parts of Shillong.

Going back to 2018, I was elated when the KHADC under the leadership of Bah Ardent and the erstwhile System of Mylliem declared the forest as 'Law Adong' for the purpose of preserving it for the future generations. Hope-

fully, the collective spirit of the tribal way of life, which regards the community forest as sacred, will triumph over the individualistic greed of modern day capitalism.

Finally, I request all those concerned with the well-being of this patch of greenery, in an ever-growing concrete jungle, to make your voices heard so that the powers that be will take notice.

I wish the noble gesture of preserving the forest by Bah Ardent and his party a resounding success.

Yours etc,
PS Nongsiej,
Via email

Expedite disbursement of the Centralised Provident Fund Scheme

Editor,
Through the columns of your esteemed daily, I once again would like to make an appeal to the Government's conscience regarding the long-standing plight of Deficit School Employees

in Meghalaya—an issue your publication has highlighted time and again, yet one that remains tragically unresolved.

The recent death of a retired Deficit School Employee in Tura has brought the issue into painfully sharp focus. This gentleman retired on May 30, 2025 after decades of selfless service. In accordance with the directive issued by the Director of Elementary and School Education, he deposited his entire savings into the bank under the Centralised Provident Fund (CPF) scheme on 30 November 2024, with hopes of a secure post-retirement life. Instead, he was left empty-handed. Within weeks, he fell critically ill and was rushed to GNRC Hospital, Guwahati. Unable to access his Centralised Provident Fund (CPF) scheme or secure an emergency loan—due to the absence of pension documents—his family had no choice but to borrow from others. Tragically, it was too late. He passed away, leaving behind a grieving widow now struggling to manage daily

household expenses, still waiting for the pension that was rightfully his.

This is not an isolated case. Teachers and fourth-grade staff who have served our society with dedication and dignity continue to face systemic delays in receiving their retirement benefits. Their stories frequently appear in newspapers, but rarely seem to stir meaningful action.

I therefore urgently request the Government and the concerned department to:

- 1) Expedite the implementation of the CPF scheme and ensure that the pension benefits of the deceased employee are extended to his widow on humanitarian grounds.
- 2) Establish a fast-track mechanism to ensure that all retiring Deficit School Employees receive at least interim pension orders and Gratuity within months of retirement, allowing them to meet medical and familial emergencies.

The Hon'ble High Court has already directed the State to implement the Centralised Provident Fund scheme.

Every delay is not merely administrative—it is a matter of life, dignity, and justice. We must act now to prevent further suffering. Let no teacher or staff member die waiting for what is rightfully theirs.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj Chhetry,
Tura

Negligence and Inefficiency of Shillong GPO

Editor,
I am writing to express my frustration and disappointment with the abysmal service provided by the General Post Office (GPO) in Shillong, specifically with regards to the delivery of my updated Aadhaar card.

As a resident of Lummawrie, Laitumkhrah, I applied for an update of my Aadhaar card over a month ago (12th of June 2025). However, despite numerous visits to the GPO office in IGP, I have yet to receive my updated card. The unhelpful and uncertain responses from the office

staff have only added to my frustration.

In contrast, a friend who applied on the same day received his card within two weeks, despite living in a more remote area (Sohra, Shella). This raises concerns about the GPO's efficiency and the systematic functioning of our city's postal service. Is it too much to expect a timely and reliable delivery of essential documents like Aadhaar cards?

As a citizen, I am forced to ask: Am I expected to use and carry an A4-sized e-Aadhaar everywhere I go?

I urge the authorities to investigate and improve the GPO's services. Citizens deserve timely and reliable delivery of essential documents.

Yours etc.,
E. Sumer,
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.

"Part of courage is simple consistency."

— Peggy Noonan

The Shillong Times

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SHILLONG, TUESDAY, JULY 22, 2025

Denuded forests, drying rivers

RECENTLY Power Minister AT Mondal warned that the water level at the Umiang Lake is at a critically low level and that this might lead to unstable power supply in the coming winter months. Meghalaya has already been listed as a region that has joined the ranks of rain-deficient states. This is not without reasons. A visit to several parts of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills particularly East Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills reveal that the rivers there are drying up and the rocks lining the river beds are all exposed. Should the Minister in charge of PHED not speak up and caution those denuding the forests for large scale charcoal burning or for timber to stop in their tracks before the people of this state are imperilled and are pushed to migrate to other states as refugees?

The State Forest Department appears to be sleeping even while forests are disappearing at a rate faster than the trees glibly planted on World Environment Day — a day that has become just a symbolic celebration and has lost its meaning. What's the point of a top-heavy State Forest Department when the forests are disappearing faster than the Forest Administration is able to react, unless the Department is itself in collusion with the predators. For, it is impossible to believe that the Forest Department does not know that there are thriving timber factories in the state when the Supreme Court had in 2006 clearly stated that timber harvesting must follow a detailed working plan which has to be duly approved. The Supreme Court never differentiated between forests under the District Councils or those managed by the Forest Department. The apex court tasked the State Forest Department to make the Forest Working Plans in collaboration with the Councils. Here questions also arise as to the role of the State Environmental Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAC) which was created to safeguard our forests and not to give forest clearance to every applicant. Such institutions ought to be brought under judicial scrutiny before our forests disappear completely and Meghalaya turns into a desert as predicted by climate experts.

Climate Change in Meghalaya is a human-induced problem. The depth of meaning of the words Climate Change and its irreversible impacts are not well understood in the vernacular languages and nor has its meaning been transmitted to the level of villages so that there are discussions around the theme of Climate Change impacts. Unless this term is understood and percolates down to the rural hamlets and schools, deforestation will not be arrested. A time has come for the people of Meghalaya to rise as one and unite under the banner of "Save Meghalaya's Forests and Rivers," and challenge the Government on its lackadaisical attitude towards conservation. This despite all kinds of assistance coming in from organisations like AstraZeneca which is ostensibly paying for carbon sequestration. No one really knows where this carbon sequestration is happening; how its happening and who is measuring it. Much has been flaunted about the Payment for Eco-system Services (PES). Where are those forests? And who are their guardians?

Meghalaya Should Embrace the German SES Programme to Build a Modern Economy

By Avner Pariaat

If Meghalaya wants to take a real leap into the future — into a space where livelihoods are secure, youth are skilled and employed, and local industries thrive — the State must seriously consider leveraging international expertise. One of the most promising and cost-effective ways to do that is through the Senior Expert Service (SES), a programme of the German Government that sends retired industry experts and professionals to train people across the world. Think of it as bringing in decades of global know-how into our own classrooms, our farms, our small businesses, or our government training centres. And the best part? It is affordable (we need to pay only for the stay, food and — if required — travel of the experts), it is customisable, and built for places exactly like ours.

What is SES?

SES is run by Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. It provides highly experienced volunteer experts — former CEOs, master craftsmen, engineers, healthcare professionals, and more — to developing economies so that local people can learn, upskill, and compete. They come not to take over but to train, mentor, and pass on world-class skills, often at very little cost to the host. Now imagine this applied to Meghalaya's mushroom growers, ginger processors, bamboo artisans, welders, electricians, tour guides, or healthcare workers. Imagine one SES expert guiding a group of our people to build a better fermentation chamber for fruit wine, or showing how to wire a building safely using international electrical standards. This is the kind of revolution Meghalaya needs.

Meghalaya is at a very interesting crossroads. On one hand, we have no dearth of natural resources — from high-value crops like turmeric to renewable bamboo — and a young population ready to work. On the other hand, global trends — like the demand for clean energy, sustainable tourism, organic foods, and trained health workers — are opening up new market opportunities. But skills are the bridge that our youth need desperately.

Right now, many of our training centres are trying

their best but often lack experienced trainers or modern techniques. There's a clear gap in quality and experience. SES can fill this gap beautifully. Take the example of mushroom cultivation. Meghalaya's climate is perfect for it, and farmers are already trying. But SES can introduce best practices from Europe: how to increase yield, how to store longer, how to sell in higher-value packaging. The same goes for spice processing — why settle for raw ginger exports when SES experts can teach us to optimise the processes we use to make spice pastes, powders, or essential oils. Another example: in the piggery and butchery sector, SES can bring expertise in hygiene, feed management, and meat packaging that meets international food safety standards. This can open up interstate and even export markets. For the booming construction sector, imagine what a welding technician or rural mason can become with advanced German training — faster, safer, and more efficient workers who can command higher pay.

Germans are known all over the world for their dedication to high standards of quality control, finish and professionalism. With their help, Meghalaya's artisans, workers and labourers can shift from small, scattered individuals just making ends meet to providers of premium services and products!

The potential of SES is huge, but the key to success is coordination and alignment. It's not enough for a training centre or an NGO to bring in one expert. We need departments — like Labour & Employment, Agriculture, Horticulture, Commerce & Industries, Tourism, and Health & Family Welfare — to identify priority skills and clusters, then invite SES experts accordingly. The entire process is easy and accessible online which anyone can do. We often wonder about the sudden (seemingly inexplicable) rise of China but did you know that since 1983 (the year SES was formed) they have availed 6,663 trainings (as of 2023). India sadly has availed just 1,173 trainings during the same time period.

Perhaps most importantly, SES respects local knowledge. They don't impose their methods but co-create with communities. That's crucial for states like Meghalaya, where culture, land, and labour have deep meaning. With the right translation and facilitation, SES experts become like master guides — not unlike our own storied and venerated elders — who pass on knowledge and knowhow with care and integrity.

Meghalaya Government departments can make effective use of the Senior Expert Service (SES) to upgrade skills, introduce global best practices, and build technical capacity in

In this regard, the state government should empower all District Skill Committees and local ITIs to submit SES requests. Each visit can be tailored: a two-week bakery training in Sohra, a month-long mushroom workshop in Ri Bhoi, or a solar lighting installation bootcamp in South Garo Hills. The idea is to embed these experts directly into existing institutions and push upskilling from within.

Other Indian states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala have already used SES to train in leather processing, fish farming, and hospital management. Countries like Nepal and Ghana have used SES to upgrade vocational centres and even start new export-oriented businesses. The formula works — because it's built on long-term mentoring and local relevance. SES doesn't drop in and leave. They build relationships, revisit, and follow up. When SES trains 20 youth in modern construction methods and five of them open their own companies or seek contracts in other states, the ripple effect is assured and big. They employ others, inspire younger peers, and bring back pride to skilled trades. With sectors like healthcare, the benefits are both local and global. SES can help Meghalaya's general duty assistants and home health aides reach the standard required for working in Germany or other countries that face healthcare worker shortages. That means long-term remittances and formal employment pipelines for the state.

Perhaps most importantly, SES respects local knowledge. They don't impose their methods but co-create with communities. That's crucial for states like Meghalaya, where culture, land, and labour have deep meaning. With the right translation and facilitation, SES experts become like master guides — not unlike our own storied and venerated elders — who pass on knowledge and knowhow with care and integrity.

Meghalaya Government departments can make effective use of the Senior Expert Service (SES) to upgrade skills, introduce global best practices, and build technical capacity in

ways that are cost-efficient and impactful. The Tourism Department could use SES experts to train local guides, food vendors, and homestay operators in international hospitality standards, enhancing tourist experiences and boosting rural incomes. The Community & Rural Development (C&RD) Department might bring in SES specialists to support rural livelihoods through advanced training in bamboo crafts, briquette making, or mushroom cultivation, helping self-help groups and village enterprises scale up and access new markets. In the Health Department, SES can provide expert-led training for nurses, general duty assistants, and pharmacy aides — especially important as Germany and other countries open their doors to Indian healthcare workers. The Social Welfare Department can collaborate with SES to support upskilling for persons with disabilities and women in trades such as tailoring, food processing, and beauty therapy. Through such partnerships, government departments can deliver high-quality, hands-on training with international know-how — positioning Meghalaya to grow into a more modern, skilled, and inclusive economy without incurring heavy consultancy costs.

The government's role should be to broker these relationships, provide space and basic logistics, and let the process unfold in real time. We don't need 100 SES visits in the first year. Even 10 carefully chosen engagements in profitable skills can build momentum and community confidence. If we want Meghalaya to be a modern economy, we must think beyond subsidies and schemes. We must think about investing in people, upskilling clusters, and creating rural value chains that are resilient and competitive. SES is the perfect vehicle to start this journey — offering the best of European training with a deep respect for grassroots realities. I implore every single official of the Government to not waste this opportunity. With the right approach, a bit of coordination, and clear prioritisation, SES could become one of the most impactful partnerships Meghalaya has ever built.

To learn more, visit <https://ses-bonn.de/en/home>

Unsafe at work: Break the silence and improve competitiveness

By Ajit Ranade

Let's look at three recent events which symbolise workers' plight due to lack of safety at the workplace. On June 30, in Telangana's worst industrial mishap, 46 people died, eight are still in hospital and another eight are still missing, some possibly charred beyond recognition. This human tragedy in an industrial area, was caused by the explosion of a reactor in a chemical plant, heard several kilometres away. To call it an accident absolves the management of the neglect of proper maintenance, or not adhering to safety protocols. In the same Sangareddy district alone, 25 workers died within a four month period in 2024. The cases of injuries or near fatal cases, which have not been reported can only be guessed. But Sangareddy is just an illustrative case, not an isolated one, across the country.

Now consider another "accident". On June 7, in the Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC) area near Pirangut on the outskirts of Pune city, 18 workers were charred to death, 15 being women, in a deadly fire in a chemical factory. As per the investigation by some intrepid labour activists, it was revealed that the workers were not even aware they were handling hazardous chemicals. They were marked by codes masking the true name of the chemicals. It was revealed that the women workers were paid less than minimum wage. The vulnerable are exploited, have job insecurity and face the most unsafe and risky conditions. This company was in operation since 2012, but got registered only in 2020. It also managed to obtain an ISO 9001 certification for quality management. No inspector ever visited the factory till this "accident" happened. This cannot be attributed to ease of doing business. While EODB has shifted the onus to self-certification on the owners and managers of factories, it surely does not mean complete abdication of inspection, especially of worker safety in hazardous industries. It is made worse by the management's greed and corner-cutting, like disabling safety sensors, or running the presses at higher speeds to achieve sales targets.

The third event is the launch of a report called "Crushed". This is India's only long running evidence based report published by Safe in India (SII), an NGO dedicated to improving worker safety in India's manufacturing sector, particularly the automotive and auto-component industry, which accounts for one third of the manufacturing sector GDP. SII founded in 2016 by Sandeep Sachdeva and his colleagues, works for workers' rights, putting pressure on auto brands to improve safety for over 10 million workers in that industry. SII's work has increased worker awareness about the Employees State Insurance scheme and the ESIC role. Their work is data driven, painstaking and based on authentic testimonies of workers. Over the past seven years SII has helped 10,000 workers access ESIC benefits, but this still represents only 40 percent of the victims. In the last few years the vendors to top ten auto brands accounted for the crushed fingers of 2333 workers. This work breaks the silence around injuries showing its true scale with official statistics. It also throws up laughable anomalies. For instance the source of data could be from two arms of the government, the labour ministry and the insurance corporation. In Haryana routinely the ministry reports the number of injuries around 40 to 50 per year for several years. But the ESIC claims benefits are going to nearly a thousand

workers. And this is with only 40 percent awareness among workers. It is clear that thousands of workers are getting killed or maimed across the automotive sector, and the official silence must be broken.

Thankfully the Economic Survey of this year has highlighted the issue of workplace safety. It says that Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) regulations are not to be seen as burdensome expenses but as strategic investment. The SII estimates that the country loses up to 4 percent of GDP due to neglect of safety. India ranks a low 133 in global labour productivity, and this rank is directly correlated with inadequate OSH standards and poor working conditions. India's rank is significantly below China, Vietnam and Mexico. Investment in safety and OSH protocols not only improve the life of the worker and her family, but raise productivity, morale and improve the trust between workers and management. For the factories it reduces absenteeism, medical expenses and penalties for non-compliance. Frequent shutdowns due to crushed fingers can disrupt supply schedules and reduce competitiveness.

The lesson from neighbouring Bangladesh is telling. In 2013 an eight-storey building housing garment factories collapsed in the Rana Plaza, and 1134 people died. This shocking incident led to drastic changes, including the putting in place the Accord on Fire and Building Safety, which led to the training of 1.4 million workers. It was certainly a factor which increased Bangladesh's garment sector competitiveness and its exports outpaced even India and Vietnam. Even Chile and Costa Rica experienced strong labour productivity growth due to improved OSH standards and reduced occupational injuries. Economic theory also suggests that investing in worker safety and occupational health leads to reaping benefits of higher productivity, motivation, loyalty and possibly lower absenteeism. Management's demonstrated and visible commitment is important.

The most ironic thing about the provision of workplace injury and death benefits or compensation is this. The Employee State Insurance scheme was established by the ESI Act of 1948, the same year as the setting up of the National Health Scheme of the United Kingdom. Both aim to provide universal social security and healthcare (in case of India to workers, and in UK to all citizens). The present reality is that almost all citizens have access and get benefits from the NHS whereas for the ESI, many workers are not even aware of their rights and benefits. In design the ESI is one of the finest schemes in the world, but in implementation it falls very short.

The way forward is clear. There should be complete transparency in data reporting on accidents and fatalities, making it consistent across ESIC and labour department. Compliance of safety and OSH protocols must be incentive based. There should be public private partnership (through NGOs if necessary) to increase worker awareness about rights and safety. The top brands must be made accountable for practices in their vendors, across the supply chain.

Finally let us note that worker safety does not merely have an instrumental value but is ultimately a moral and ethical commitment too.

(Dr. Ajit Ranade is a noted economist). (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Letters to the Editor

Upholding Law & Order During Local Festivals

Editor,
I am writing as a concerned citizen of Meghalaya to highlight a growing issue that threatens both our democratic values and public welfare — the forceful closure of central government offices and essential services during local festivals.

While it is only right that our state celebrates its vibrant culture and diverse traditions with pride, such celebrations must not come at the cost of violating the rule of law, disrupting national institutions, or infringing upon the rights of others.

It is important to remember that central government offices such as banks and post offices operate under Union laws, including the Negotiable Instruments Act, 1881, which clearly defines bank holidays and specifies that only the Reserve Bank of India and notified banks can follow certain holiday schedules. These offices are not bound by state-declared holidays, and any attempt to shut them down through coercion or pressure is legally unjustified.

When banks and post offices are forcibly closed, it affects not just government operations but also ordinary citizens — individuals needing critical financial services, postal deliveries, or communication support.

To the Government of Meghalaya, I urge that it

takes a clear and principled stand — protect the cultural identity of our people while ensuring that constitutional institutions remain protected from unlawful interference.

To the local pressure groups and civil society organizations advocating for these closures, I appeal for reflection — true respect for tradition does not require force. Let us celebrate our heritage without compromising the dignity and rights of others. Cultural pride must be rooted in mutual respect, dialogue, and coexistence, not intimidation.

Let us move forward together — not divided by pressure or fear, but united by wisdom, justice, and a shared love for our land and nation

Yours etc.,
Marbiang Rymbai
Via email

Ban on modified lights

Editor,
Apropos to your recent news report on the menace of illegal installation of after-market headlights on two and four wheelers like LEDs and HIDs which is not from a company or manufacturer installed, this problem is critical to address. The State Traffic Police as well as the Transport Department ought to tackle this menace. The use of such modified and illegal lights on vehicles not only obstructs other oncoming vehicles but also puts pedestrian lives in danger at night or late evening. There is a regulation on the use of such lights and most

importantly it is for the Traffic Department to initiate a poster or flyer campaign in all traffic junctions before imposing heavy penalties and also taking intensive patrolling at night even along the highways. Many a times accidents occur because of illiterate drivers even though they may be educated or semi-educated but are not informed of this violation. It is important that the SP in-charge of traffic address this matter lest it turns into a legal wrangle in the court.

Yours etc.,
Dominic S. Wankhar,
Via email

More Govt action needed to contain drug addiction

Editor,
In Meghalaya today, narcotic drugs addiction, particularly among the youth, has become a serious threat to the social fabric. It is unfortunately quite common to spot young individuals scavenging through streets and dustbins to fund their addiction. Ironically, these addicts are none other than our children. Thus, the society and government as a whole needs to come forward and fight this menace together. As per some reports, over 3 lakh people in Meghalaya — almost 10% of the population — are drug users in some form. However, awareness campaigns led by NGOs and civil society groups remain sporadic and largely ineffective at the grassroots level in

tackling this serious societal problem.

Enforcement agencies including the Police, Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), and Customs are undoubtedly making efforts — conducting regular seizures and maintaining vigilance — but it is virtually impossible to completely stop the inflow of narcotics in any society. The impact of the Drug Reduction, Elimination & Action Mission (DREAM) launched by Government for combating drug trafficking and setting up rehabilitation centres has also been minimal, owing to its half-hearted implementation and lack of legal teeth to support its objectives.

Instead of spending large amounts of taxpayer's revenue on 'inorganic' events like the Cherry Blossom Festival (which are more state-sponsored events than festivals), the Government should shift its priorities and bring in a dedicated law that empowers authorities to detain and treat drug addicts found in public places with the aim of protecting and rehabilitating them without criminalization. Such legislation should also include schemes for setting up of district level drug de-addiction centres with trained medical professionals and psychologists with mechanisms for post-recovery support to reintegrate the individuals back to society. Although Meghalaya is a revenue starved state, there should not be any dearth of funds to run the detention and rehabilitation centres for the addicts if the Government re-allocates funds from extrava-

gant events, luxury vehicles for ministers and bureaucrats, and other unnecessary expenditures. Drug addiction is a cancer that is eating away our society, posing unbelievable threats to our youth and citizens. It is the moral duty of each citizen of Meghalaya to mobilize public opinion and demand accountability and decisive action from the Government on this serious issue. It is time for the Government to wake up — not just with data, but with concrete action for saving our youths.

Yours etc.,
D. Bhattacharjee
Shillong-1

Urgent Need for Cadastral Survey & Land Reforms in Meghalaya

Editor,
The editorial "Looting the Commons" (ST July 17, 2025) was very interesting to read. It is the failure of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council and the Syiem of Myllem in not keeping the sanctity of the agreement signed in 2014 in which they had jointly declared it as a "Law Adong". Merely declaring a "Law Adong" without monitoring and upkeeping what is happening in and around it is meaningless. Therefore, unless the idea piloted by late Brington Buhai Lyngdoh the State's first Minister of Revenue and Finance to have in place a cadastral

survey and implement the same as stipulated in the Meghalaya Land Survey and Records Preparation Act, 1980 to formalize this effort, with implementation support from the Autonomous District Councils and technical assistance from the state government, such incidents will keep recurring in the absence of record of land rights. One recalls that the Land Reforms Commission headed by Late R. Tokin Rymbai way back in 1974 or 51 years ago highlighted the rampant illegal sale of community lands in Khasi Hills. The absence of codified land laws and governance mechanism and the urgent need for cadastral mapping and record-of-rights to protect indigenous land rights are imperatives that the Khasi civil society should take up urgently because politicians will not do it. Although the Act of 1980 was amended in 1991 to allow District Councils to implement the Land Survey Act with state support, no clear roadmap or funding mechanism was established, leaving the Amendment largely symbolic.

The editorial is right in stating that "the KHADC needs a wake-up call for rapid action to reclaim community land." But unless what is referred to above is in place how will the District Council reclaim such land?

Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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

"All we know is still infinitely less than
all that remains unknown."

— William Harvey

The Shillong Times

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Dhankar springs a surprise

VICE President Jagdeep Dhankar has raised a political storm by abruptly announcing his resignation from the exalted post just below that of the Constitutional head of the nation, the President. The manner in which he announced his exit at fag end of the first day of the Parliament's monsoon session was unprecedented. The person who chairs the discussions in the Rajya Sabha has suddenly called it quits at the most inappropriate hour. From the way the responses came, somewhat slowly, from Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself gives rise to suspicion that Dhankar had not taken the PM into confidence before he sent his papers to the President. Or, this is part of a larger plot. The absence of Health Minister JP Nadda, the BJP chief, and some others at a meeting that Dhankar called also raised eyebrows.

The reason cited by Dhankar, that he was doing so on advice from his doctor on health grounds sounds odd because just a few days ago, the Vice President had stated that he would complete his full term; a word he did not keep. Obviously, there was some development about which he would not speak out. Dhankar, who has been with the BJP for several years now and led the party's legal cell for a period in his capacity as a senior Supreme Court lawyer, gained prominence during the term he served as Governor of West Bengal. He kept Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee on tenterhooks all through his presence in Kolkata, in relation to her tantrums against Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the central government. Perceptions were that he kept her under some control by virtue of his eminent understanding of Constitutional law. Banerjee heaved a sigh of relief when he bid goodbye to West Bengal, moved back to Delhi and took charge as Vice President. Dhankar had his way of handling ticklish issues while not crossing the red lines.

It must be noted that in recent times, Dhankar took a highly principled stand after the currency bundles burning incident in a Supreme Court judge's out-house. He also courageously criticised members of the judiciary for their questionable stands; something that no other politician ever tried to do. There were attempts to corner Dhankar in this respect, including from politicians. This might or might not have any bearing on his resignation now. It is likely that Dhankar has some plans for the future. Or he might quietly go into retirement. He is already aged 74, but that does not prevent him from aiming high. Age may not be in Dhankar's favour, but his sense of courage makes him an outstanding leader. Politics today is largely populated by lesser beings who show no courage to call a spade a spade or bell the cat. This being the case, it is imperative that Dhankar must remain vocal and active in public life.

Is Myntdu Doomed to Become the Next Wah Umkhrach?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

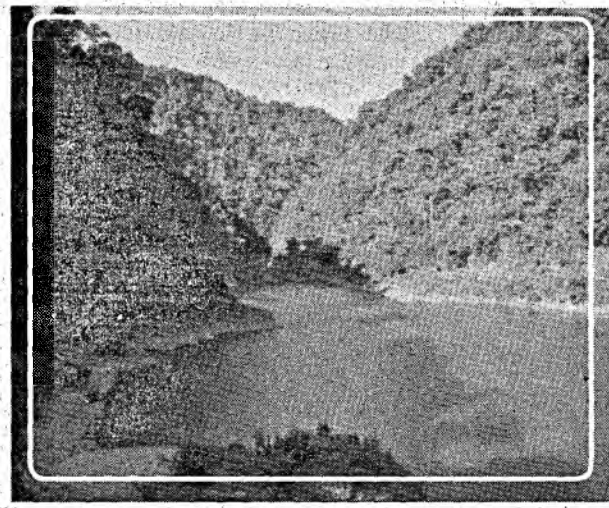
Travelling to Jowai sometimes can feel like a trip back to a time when the water bodies of Shillong around the city were still alive and teeming with life. Having grown up not very far from a tributary of the Wah Umkhrach, I remembered seeing people fishing in the stream while wading through it with a khoh (bamboo basket). Then, as the stream descends, it forms a waterfall and joins the main body of the Wah Umkhrach which then makes a hairpin and continues its flow, passing through Demeinong, Polo on its way to join the Umiam. The crystal-clear water resembled the Umngot River's portrayal in tourist reels. If one had told us back then that this is what would attract tourists from all over the country, we would have laughed. Why would someone come for something so ordinary? But times have changed, and the Wah Umkhrach resembles a drain instead of the serene stream of yesteryear. Can we ever get those memories back? I don't know. But we have a responsibility to ensure that no other water bodies suffer the same fate that befell the Wah Umkhrach. This brings us to Myntdu, the lifeline of Jowai.

Last week, I accompanied some friends to a meeting in Thadlaskien with a group of concerned citizens from Jowai. This group comprised retired government servants and social activists, with familiar faces like HH Mohrmen, who also joined the meeting. Among the others there was a person whose name I remember hearing many times in the past, but never had a face to put to it. This was Khroo Lamsalanki Pariat, an environmental activist, president of the Khooid Ya Ka Wah Myntdu (KYM) and party to the case before the National Green Tribunal where he has alleged that the road construction by the PWD, Government of Meghalaya is causing serious damage to the hydrology and ecology of the Myntdu River. We were there to understand the issues relating to the case as part of a research project. The meeting was organized by the intern, whose uncle, a retired government college teacher, was also a participant.

Khroo Lamsalanki Pariat told the audience, especially us, about the case in the NGT. From his testimony, what became apparent was that the Myntdu was facing an existential crisis, and this did not bode very well for the residents of Jowai, who depend on the river for

the drinking water supplied through the PHE. In the discussion, he also explained the river's deep spiritual and religious significance to the Pnars, highlighting that it is more than just a body of water. It is a deity that is still worshipped to this day and has a deep connection to Jowai and its surrounding villages. The others in the meeting also discussed the importance of Myntdu and how over the years they had tried to revive and rejuvenate it, with the KYM being their latest attempt. But the challenges have also been increasing with a rise in the urban population and the disregarding of laws established by the State, which is constantly being violated. Khroo had organized a field trip for us so that we could see how the river's existence was being threatened.

The first site we visited was the Tyrcchi Falls in the



village of Khliehtyrcchi. The stream that makes the waterfall is a tributary of Myntdu, which joins it as it passes through Pynthor Nein, which we were told was the food basket of Jowai. Standing on top of the viewpoint, one could see a large valley clothed in green, which in autumn would start turning golden yellow. It was one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen. The Myntdu River and its tributaries drained the valley, circling Jowai before flowing south, receiving other tributaries, and ultimately reaching the plains of Sylhet or Shella-Hat. Khroo showed us the village of Mihmyntdu, which lies at the other end of the valley, the source of the Myntdu. It emerges from a forest in the village, and no one except the clans connected to the site may go to the source. He also told stories of how the spirits inhabiting the forest thwarted efforts to partition it. It was a very fascinating

story, and one could feel the deep reverence that he and the other participants had for the river.

They took us to Jowai to show us how people were violating the NGT order by building within 50 meters of the river. Khroo showed us two sites where the buildings had come up very close to the river and described how connivance combined with apathy led to violations. Then he took us to the site connected to the earlier-mentioned NGT case. This was a new bypass which was coming up which starts from near the District and Sessions Court and joins the road that leads to Dawki out of Jowai. It was not a long stretch, and considering the lack of traffic, the need for such a project seemed unnecessary. But what was unmistakable was that the debris from the road construction had already started interfering

with the flow of the river. A lot of sand and boulders had accumulated along the banks, narrowing the width. Loose rocks hanging from the roadside wall also posed a potential hazard.

While we were inspecting the impact on the river, a vehicle pulled up with a person coming out accompanied by a bodyguard who was sporting a gun in the holster. I did not know the person, but he seemed to know everyone else. He shook hands with a person I was standing with and nodded at me. I nodded back, confused about who he was. Later, while returning, we were told that the man with the bodyguard was Ngaitlang Dhar, former MLA of Umroi and the contractor in charge of the project. It was a very strange experience.

Khroo suggested that we visit the water treatment plant as well, which was within Jowai town and from where we could get another

view of the Myntdu. They showed us the water pumping and treatment processes at the plant before distribution to Jowai's population. He kept telling us that he was told by officials the water was clear but not clean.

Recently, the Government of Meghalaya announced it was going to develop the Wah Umkhrach riverfront into a tourist destination at a cost of around 39-49 crores. Khroo and others remarked one could revive Myntdu at half the cost and, unlike Wah Umkhrach, it is not yet dead. The reasoning seemed quite sound, but it missed an important point. In October 2024, the NPP-led MDA government filed an FIR against eight individuals, including the Chief Engineer (NH) of the PWD, for an alleged multi-crore scam in the construction of the Shillong-Nongstoin-Rongjeng-Tura road, which cost Rs 2,366.77 crore during the Mukul Sangma government. Earlier, in 2023, the Congress party listed ten alleged scams in a 'chargesheet' against the ruling MDA government, claiming they had cost the state hundreds of crores over a period of five years. If Congress were ever to return to power, it is certain they would also file corruption cases related to projects under the MDA government, just as the latter has done in this case. From these events, the logic becomes clear and simple. Allow the Myntdu to decline, and then unveil a costly rejuvenation project—funds that may ultimately benefit contractors aligned with the ruling establishment, regardless of who is in power.

Then we bid goodbye to Khroo and the others, dropped Mohrmen at his home and started on our way back. An image that stayed with me from the trip was of a couple of young boys walking to the river with their fishing rods. It reminded me of my childhood and how we used to go swimming in the Wah Umkhrach every Saturday. We would then sit on the rocks, drying ourselves with our legs hanging in the clear water filled with pebbles shining under the sun. Oh, how I wish I could go back to those days. And I just hope that the children of Jowai and the surrounding villages may never lose what we have lost in Shillong. I hope Myntdu never becomes another Wah Umkhrach.

(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)

Story of a mother and her daughter

By Salil Gewali

Until two months ago, amid the noise at a certain point on the periphery of lewdah market, there stood a petite woman -- Airo. About 25 years old, Airo and her little daughter, Dari, who was barely 6, would leave their tiny hut in Mawiong and begin their journey towards the bazaar every morning. Airo took the bus up to Mawlai Thangkiew petrol pump, because she couldn't afford to travel further by bus. From there, she walked the remaining distance. Her daughter walked beside her, holding her hand. Perhaps she did this every single day, rain or shine.

Life had not been kind to her in many respects. A single mother since her husband left three years ago, she had fought her battles in silence. For the past one and a half years, she had set up a modest makeshift stall out in the open at the outer edge of lewdah. It was a minimal plastic rack structure, just enough to hold a few packets of cigarettes, gutka, zarda, and bottles of mineral water. It wasn't much, but it was

through hardship she never imagined.

I also began buying a packet of Britannia biscuit for Dari almost every day, hoping it would bring a little more joy to her face. Well, following some good advice from kind people in the bazaar, Airo managed to get Dari admitted to a school in Jaiaiw last year. Nursery class, probably. It was her motherly hope that her daughter would receive at least one proper meal a day -- something she couldn't provide at home.

Still, I didn't know how dire her situation was getting -- until one cold day in January this year. That day, for the first time, she mustered the courage, though with hesitation, to ask if I could spare Rs 80. To explain her request, she also showed me her half-torn crossbody money bag. Inside, there was a single, lonely one-rupee coin. She looked completely run-down and drained. Yes, the winter cold was always cruel for a family that could barely afford warm clothes. Concerned, I asked her if

The weight of that truth has sat heavily on me ever since. From then on, I began slipping Airo, sometimes forcefully, a little money now and then. She would always resist at first, her pride not yet ready to yield, but she'd eventually accept, never forgetting to say, "Brother, I will try to return your money." That would only make me more emotional.

something. It was her hope -- her only way to earn and somehow make ends meet. Her business, which usually earned between Rs 80 -- Rs 150 at most per day, was totally dependent on the mercy of the weather.

My attention was drawn to this tiny stall because of Dari. Every day around two in the afternoon, I passed by their stall. Dari, with her frolicking and childish acts, brought a strange kind of joy to my routine walk. I had taken to giving Dari two toffees. At first, she accepted it shyly. Then, with time, she became friendly with me and would ask for three as well. "One for my mother," she would say. It became my small, sweet ritual.

But one day, just a month or so later, I learned something that quietly broke me. The three pieces of toffee that I had begun offering casually -- tokens of playfulness -- were actually their "breakfast."

The weight of that truth has sat heavily on me ever since. From then on, I began

she had eaten. "No brother," she replied softly. "When did you last eat?" I asked. "Day-before yesterday morning," she said. I asked what she ate then. Airo paused and then answered, "Rice... and tea."

That moment remains with me. Without another word, I offered her the money. A surge of emotion overwhelmed me. It felt like the least I could do in a world that had already taken too much from persons like Airo. She took it with both hands and thanked me with prayers, her voice trembling, eyes filled with tears -- but never once letting go of her quiet and resolute dignity.

However, it's painful to say this, but in the past one and a half months, I haven't seen Airo or little Dari in the market. The continuous rains in June must have washed away her strength to return to the bazaar to sell kwait and cigarettes. She would often lament to me how the rain messed up her days. Yes, Airo survived last year's rainy season but not this year!

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In a quiet moment, she opened up about her life -- how her education stopped after Class 7, and how there was no one she could turn to for support. Her parents, she said, had passed away long ago, leaving her alone. It struck me then, how life so often demands more than a person is ever prepared or able to give. Once, in a slip of the tongue I told her that someday I would write a story about her. Since then, she would often ask me with eagerness and gentle insistence, "When will you write my story, brother?" It was, in fact, the voice of a woman who had lived

This is the silent story of so many who come to the town with nothing but some investment money, mostly borrowed, a plastic or wooden rack, and a heart full of hope -- only to be swept aside by a world that rarely pauses for the weak and downtrodden!

From my own experience, what I can say is this -- there are not ten, not a hundred, but thousands and thousands of Airos. Each one walks with a trail of children behind her, trying to stitch together a day with just a meagre Rs. 80, Rs. 140, maybe Rs. 250 -- if fortune and weather smile!

Of course, the struggle of Airo -- or Daphi, selling green mustard leaves bring back memories of my own mother, who fought for her survival far from the warmth of home. For her, I could do little, much as I wanted to. But I can pay tribute to her now through Airo or Daphi.

Letters to the Editor

Rethinking Smart Cities: Build minds before buildings

Editor,

There is a stark and undeniable distinction between a city and a village, and rightly so. Cities are known for their infrastructure, fast pace, and modern amenities, while villages reflect simplicity, a closeness to nature, and a slower, more grounded rhythm of life. For generations, we have understood and accepted this balance. So why, then, is there such an urgent push to transform every village into a city?

Why must every corner of the country be made faster, more efficient, more instantly accessible? Why do we believe that development is measured by how wide our roads are, or how many high-rise buildings we have?

There is wisdom in the old saying, "Slow and steady wins the race." And yet, we often race blindly towards a future defined not by wisdom, but by convenience. In our pursuit of ease, we have become passive, disconnected, and deeply reliant on systems that prioritise comfort over conscience. We no longer live with awareness, but with fear, the fear of falling behind, of not having enough, of not being enough. Greed becomes our compass,

and comfort becomes our prison.

And now, under the banner of progress, we speak of smart cities. Digital displays, expressways, and towering structures are held up as signs of advancement. But is that truly what it means to be smart? Or have we misunderstood the very definition?

True smartness lies not in knowing everything, but in understanding what is truly needed and what is not. It is not about building more, but about building wisely. Not about faster roads, but about better destinations.

As a layperson, I often ask myself: why is there such urgency to build easy-access highways, yet so little urgency to provide easy-access education and healthcare, especially in rural areas? Why do we glorify massive buildings that often come at the cost of trees, water bodies, and wildlife, while villages still lack basic facilities to meet their people's needs?

I fear that in our search for an artificial, air-conditioned, fast-paced lifestyle, we shall lose the very natural oxygen we breathe. We forget that true development must co-exist with nature, not conquer it.

Let us look at our government schools in rural areas. Many are in a state of abandonment, with broken windows, crumbling walls, leaky roofs, and non-functional classrooms. There is often a complete absence

of digital infrastructure, and when computers are present, they are rarely operational. These are not learning environments; they are forgotten spaces.

Yet we accept this reality without question. We dismiss it with phrases like, "Everything owned by the government is like this," and live with the mindset that those in power are beyond accountability. But in a democracy, that is not how things should work. As citizens, it is not just our right to question; it is our responsibility.

If the government is serious about building a smart nation, the transformation must begin not with technology or transport, but with people. Smart cities cannot exist without smart citizens, and smart citizens come from quality education, accessible healthcare, and communities built on knowledge and well-being.

Let us redefine what it means to be smart:

- A smart city meets the needs of its people.
- A smart village has accessible schools and healthcare facilities, not malls or high-rises.
- A smart nation does not destroy its forests to build towers, but preserves nature while uplifting its people.
- A smart system does not only build for the short term, but plans for the long term.

Instead of asking how quickly we can reach our

destination, let us ask whether we are heading in the right direction. If the youth are the future of our country, then it is only logical and just that we invest first in their education, in their health, and in their dignity.

Progress is not just about speed. It is about depth. It is about wisdom. And it is about the heart. Until every village has a functioning school, a reliable hospital and healthcare services, and the opportunity for its people to thrive, no city, no matter how technologically advanced, can truly be called smart.

Yours etc.,

Dapbianglin Sohkhet,

Via email

Deteriorating condition of Mawbah road

Editor,

Through your daily, I wish to raise a pressing concern regarding the lamentable state of Mawbah (Barapathar) Road, situated within the 18 West Shillong Assembly Constituency. Although Mawbah is often described as a small village, its density and daily vibrancy tells another story. This fact is evident from the fact that demand for basic necessities, such as LPG cylinders from M/s Khasi Pnar Gas Agency alone takes nearly a month to meet the demand. In addition, Bharat Gas Agency also supplies cylinders for

two days a month. This is a powerful indicator of the population's size and activity.

More than just a local thoroughfare, this road is the lifeline for thousands. It connects people not only to their workplace/homes, but also to five cremation and burial grounds that serve the diverse faiths of greater Shillong. Its importance in facilitating both daily life and crucial community rituals cannot be overstated.

Yet, the deplorable condition of this road stands in stark contrast to its significance. Large potholes riddle the surface, making vehicle travel hazardous and putting every road commuter at risk, especially after dark. The narrowness of the road, compounded by encroaching walls and eroded edges, leaves barely enough room for commuters, further endangering lives. Broken iron gratings on roadside culverts have been neglected for months. When it rains, these dangers multiply and transform the road into a treacherous obstacle course.

Frankly, the current macadamized surface appears to be crumbling away faster than it can serve its purpose. If immediate and comprehensive repairs are not undertaken, it is only a matter of time before a preventable tragedy occurs.

I urgently call upon the authorities to recognize the indispensable role Mawbah Road plays in the community

and to act without delay. Safe roads are not just about convenience—they are about dignity and the right to safety for every citizen.

Yours etc.,
Krishna Chhetri
Shillong -2

Non-issuance of OBC Certificates in Meghalaya

Editor,

Through your esteemed daily, I would like to share my views regarding non-issuance of OBC certificates in Meghalaya. I am from the OBC category and have a certificate to that effect but my children are deprived of this certificate. The reason behind this is not understood.

The OBC certificate is a very important document and it is required for many competitive examinations. If this certificate is issued to eligible persons, they will be greatly benefitted. I therefore, request the competent authority to look into this matter and do the needful in the best interest of job aspirants.

Yours etc.,
Sheep Lohar,
Tura

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

*"Man's wisdom is his best friend;
folly his worst enemy."*

—William Temple

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Abuse of Power by Traditional Heads

THE news that a Nokma (village head) sold 1.5 Kms of community land near Nokrek Biosphere Reserve to a coal miner is yet another case of abuse of power by a traditional head. This comes close on the heels of the reported sale of land inside Mawpat Protected forests in Greater Shillong area. The Nokma ostensibly sold the land to an individual who claims that he will carry out scientific coal mining in the area. How can land in the proximity of a protected zone be allowed for mining purposes – scientific or otherwise? What are the protective mechanisms in place for the scientific mining operations and who is going to monitor whether the mining is scientific or if the same old rat hole mining method is adopted? Paromgre the area where the coal mining is proposed to be carried out falls under the Chokpot C&RD Block in South Garo Hills and is the source of several rivers that flow through South Garo Hills. These rivers are likely to be affected by acid mine drainage as has happened in East Jaintia Hills where two rivers are dead till date. The question that arises is how can the Nokma on his own volition and without any consultation with the community sell ancestral land where apparently coal mining is already under way? Thankfully the clan and community members have raised their voices and demanded to know how this community-owned land was sold without consulting them. They have demanded that the coal mining be stopped at once in the interest of the future generation.

This action by the Chras and clan members of Paromgre A'king and the local residents in blowing the whistle over this secret deal between the Nokma and the coal mine owner should send a strong signal across the state. Meghalaya is today inching towards landlessness where ancestral community and clan lands are being parcelled off to a rich tribal and political elite by those elected by the community to be the custodians of their land. How did the tribal chieftains – the Syiem, Sordar, Nokma and Rangbah Shnong usurp the power to sell off community land without their knowledge? Why have tribal communities become silent onlookers to these dubious deals that are actually pushing the large tribal population of Meghalaya especially in the Khasi-Jaintia hills to acute poverty with not even a roof over their heads. This brings us to the point of traditional institutions and whether their powers and functions can continue to be left undefined, leaving them free to operate outside the purview of the laws made by the Autonomous District Councils which are supposed to have been created to help conserve tribal lands, forests, rivers and minerals which are to be used for the larger good of the community. Needless to say, without any oversight over these traditional institutions, they have become a law unto themselves today. This arbitrary exercise of power must be curtailed and here the courts have to step in as arbiters on behalf of the people.

The caption of this article, "To Catch a Thief" is the title of a 1955 American romantic thriller film directed by Alfred Hitchcock. I am using this heading to catch the reader's attention. Nor is the title of this Op Ed in any way a subtle reference to the popular proverb on the subject. I want to clarify that's not the intention. The real direction of this article is to attract the attention of the public that, "Hey, look we have caught some big time thieves in the act. What do we do with them?" That is the whole purpose of this write-up and I think we should get down to the nitty gritty of it without any further ado.

The story goes like this. On May 22, 2014 a historic agreement was signed between the KHADC and the Office of the Syiem of Hima Mylliem to convert the 1,700 acres forest at Mawtaraw and Mawpat, formerly known as the Law Syiem into a Law Adong (traditional protected forest concept of the ancient Khasis on how to preserve the environment for the enjoyment of posterity) and a commemorative plaque was erected at the edge of the forest as additional witness to this memorable Act. Now as per provisions of Para 3 (1.ii) of the 6th Schedule the above agreement can now be interpreted as a Law of the KHADC. An Act primarily based on ancient and customary practices of the Khasis on preserving the Environment. A custom the KHADC is mandated by the 6th Schedule to protect and safeguard.

Then on July 16, 2025, The Shillong Times came out with a Front Page Breaking Story of some MLAs having been allocated plots in this very forest that was declared protected in 2014. Now this is momentous news of a rip-off by VIPs that should hold the interest of every citizen of Shillong. Unfortunately only sporadic voices of protest have risen. Lets try and see why?

Now who was the first person who uncovered this story? A recent video shows that it was Ardent Basaiawmoit, President of the VPP and former CEM KHADC who had visited the forest and found this breach of the KHADC Law and who first exposed it to the public. Now Basaiawmoit is a politician; he was the then CEM KHADC, who together with the then Syiem of Mylliem

To Catch a Thief

By Toki Blah

in 2014 signed the agreement and definitely he will try to make political capital out of this discovery. Its his privilege to do so! There's nothing wrong with that? The fact however remains that he has exposed a crime being committed against the people and the Khasi community. That a politician has uncovered a crime should not make us insensitive and numb to the fact that an offence has been committed against the people. Let us not be duped by our abhorrence to politicians and ignore the fact that a land grab has taken place at the cost of the present society and of generations to come.

As of now it appears that only the tip of the iceberg has been exposed. Yet from whatever little has been made public it is clear there is the existence of a land grab mafia. Yes a mafia or a criminal syndicate out to sell and betray the public for that proverbial 30 pieces of silver. The concern, worry and unease springs from the realization that this mafia comprises our own elected representatives acting in cahoots with supposedly respected Traditional Heads. Now I am apolitical and belong to no political party nor does any political ideology hold any attraction for me. I am however an ardent devotee and champion of our future generations. My stand today is to fight for their cause. A cause it seems some people have already sold to the highest bidder.

At this stage some might question: Toki Blah, this is not the first time such surreptitious selling of public property has taken place. It has happened before. We all know the mentality of our leaders and their eagerness to make a quick, easy buck on the sly. What is so different this time that we should all get excited about it? Let me clarify that this time there is a big difference. We the public, who have been so disgusted with the corruption and filthy shenanigans of people in power or the "High Level" as we call them, have never really managed to catch anyone in the act. This time those involved with the selling of public property have apparently been caught with "their hands in the till". Red handed! The documents registering the Act converting the Law Syiem into a Law Adong had been registered

and are available in both the Offices of the Syiem of Mylliem and the KHADC. Therefore no one can play the card of sweet ignorance and say they didn't know. That will not suffice. A photo of the now missing plaque commemorating the event is also available as evidence. Thieves, high level and powerful thugs, gangsters and looters of community resources and rights have been exposed.

When some petty thieves are caught we never hesitate to hand them over to the police. So why the hesitation this time? Everyone is equal before the Law. The Law should take its course. It is our duty as citizens to draw the attention of the Law that a crime has been committed by raising the maximum hue and cry.

Another aspect of this land grab by the rich and the powerful also needs to be highlighted. The ST report of July 16 alleges that certain MLAs have been allotted plots of land in the law Adong. Most probably these high profile MLAs must have paid money for these illegal plots. The fact however remains that the property so purchased is stolen property, stolen from the community (U Khun U Hajar). Now it will be of public interest to know as to what the law of the country has to say about receivers or purchasers of stolen property. Section 317 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS the new law that has replaced the IPC), provides:- "Whoever dishonestly receives or retains any stolen property, the possession whereof he knows or has reason to believe to have been transferred by the commission of dacoity, or dishonestly receives from a person property which he knows or has reason to believe to have been stolen, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with rigorous imprisonment for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine." It further states that, "Whoever habitually receives or deals in property which he knows or has reason to believe to be stolen property, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine."

Interesting indeed as many of us believe that it needs to

be vigorously applied here in our state. I do hope that those MLAs who did purchase plots in the Law Adong, whoever they are, also find this piece of information absorbing and of interest!

In conclusion, one is deeply saddened and frustrated with the deep societal conspiratorial silence that has prevailed since the story broke on July 16 last. God only knows why we fail to speak out for the future of our children. I would like to add one more aspect to the negative impact the above plunder is likely to have. Why has Government with its flagship Smart City Project failed to take note that this Law Adong at Mawpat and Mawtaraw forms the green belt and green lungs between Old and New Shillong? It should be fiercely protected to provide "Environmental smartness" like Central Park of New York City. What's so smart if we fail to protect the City's environment? Why has the Urban Affairs Deptt failed to see this danger and file an immediate PIL on the matter? It defies logic. Or am I the only naïve one here? Here I join Patricia Mukhim in calling for High Court intervention to save our forests and green environment from the greedy covetous eyes of so called leaders of our society.

I pray for some conscience driven Court in the State to take it upon itself to take suo-moto cognition of the crime. NGT, for all its potential towards environmental protection, somehow invokes a sense of spiritual desolation and dryness for the likes of the common man to approach. A small isolated case like the one under discussion might not even stir the embers of empathy in the NGT. So we turn to the High Court of Meghalaya. Could it sou moto take up this singular case, with the wisdom of our ancestors "Da ka nia ka jutang" but within a fixed timeframe? A message needs to be sent that Meghalaya can no longer take this nonsense of pilfering of community resources by the very institutions and individuals meant to protect such resources.

People who believe that political power entitles them to steal, abuse and purloin public property need to be taught a lesson. An example has to be set. Can we use this sordid episode to bring back ethical governance in our state? Meghalaya and its people will be forever grateful.

A Vice-President Resigns..!

By Robert Clements

Seventy-four. That's an age where most people are expected to be on a hammock somewhere, sipping something chilled, and trying to remember whether the grandchild's name is Ria or Kia. That's the time to finally learn the ukulele, a harmonica (I always bring in a harmonica, because that's the only instrument I play) or ruin a perfectly good canvas with acrylic paint and call it abstract art.

But no—what does our Vice President do? He resigns. From the second-most powerful post in the land. And not with drama, mind you. Not with a press conference and a weepy violin in the background. No, he simply cites "health reasons."

Which, as we all know, is polite political language for: "I've had it up to here. With stress. With strain. With trying to look unruffled while the nation spins like a headless chicken."

Ah yes, stress—the silent

But when the wind howls and waves thrash, the anchored boat holds fast. It doesn't flee. It doesn't fight. It just stays.

And that, I dare say, is strength.

We need anchors. Not caffeine. Not wine. Not binge-watching political debates where everyone's shouting and no one's listening.

Real anchors. Soul-anchors.

"Be still and know that I am God," says the Psalmist.

Not "Be still and scroll Twitter."

Not "Be still and update your LinkedIn."

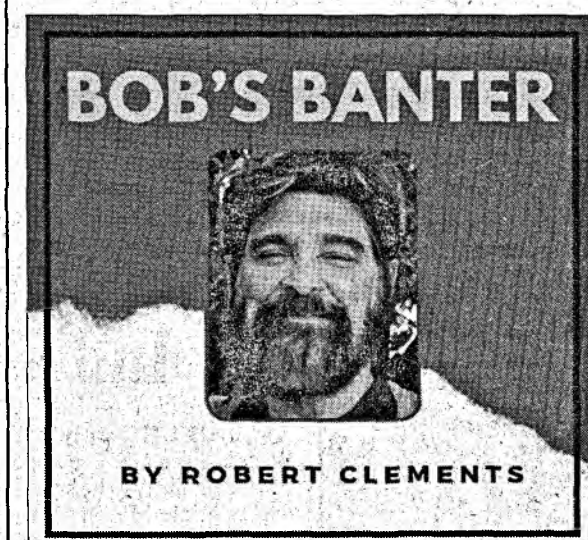
Just... be still.

And know.

Know that you're held.

Know that you're not in charge of holding the whole world together or the nation, or the Rajya Sabha. Know

that being quiet isn't failure—sometimes it's freedom. That taking your hand off the wheel doesn't mean the car crashes; it might just mean you finally



saboteur of dreams, peace, and apparently, Vice Presidents.

Now stress, my dear reader, is not some fancy new virus that came with the smartphone generation. It's been around since Eve decided to take a bite of that apple and realised she had to explain it to Adam. And later it became even more stressful as they had to explain the whole thing to God (Talk about a stressful conversation.)

But over the years, we've gone from fleeing stress to flirting with it. We whisper sweet nothings like:

"I'm swamped!"

"I haven't slept in three days!"

"My therapist says I'm a ticking time bomb!"

And we say these things with pride—as though mental burnout is the new Michelin star.

Stress has become a status symbol. A bizarre badge of honour. And it doesn't help that we're constantly being told, "Sleep is for losers!" "Hustle harder!" "If you're not tired, you're not trying!"

But here's the kicker—stress doesn't care who you are. Yeah that's a fact you know?

Whether you are a Vice President or vada pav vendor. Cabinet minister or corner shop cashier.

It strikes with equal enthusiasm.

It creeps in during policy meetings and while counting cash at a roadside stall. It shows up during bedtime stories, boardroom battles, and even birthday parties. (Especially the ones with clowns.)

And it kills—quietly, politely, with a calmness that would make a ninja jealous.

It doesn't raise its voice.

It just raises your blood pressure.

And before you know it, you're not resigning from office—you're resigning from life.

So, what's the way out?

Stillness.

Now, I know what you're thinking—"Stillness? Bob, are you suggesting I sit cross-legged on a yoga mat, chanting om while the world collapses around me?"

Well, not exactly. Unless that works for you.

Stillness, my friend, isn't laziness dressed in meditation robes. It's not about escaping life. It's about entering it fully—with eyes open and soul anchored.

Stillness is like anchoring a boat.

On calm waters, the boat sways gently.

learn to breathe.

And while we're at it, let's also talk about another form of stress we seem addicted to—the kind that's become a national habit, the one which comes from judging others.

We want peace, yes—but on our terms.

Peace with those who pray like us, look like us, talk like us.

The moment someone worships differently, votes differently, or speaks a language we don't understand, we feel our "inner peace" is threatened.

So we call for bans or we start our bashing.

We build walls.

Enact laws.

We blame others for rocking our boat—when in truth, we were never anchored in the first place.

True stillness doesn't need uniformity to feel safe.

It doesn't demand silence from others to find peace for itself.

It allows chaos outside without letting it enter within.

And yes, I get it. I write too. I know the stress.

Of deadlines that gallop like wild horses.

Topics that burn like hot coal.

Opinions that rattle me as I try to phrase them gently.

But after each column, after each fight with the keyboard, I do what the Vice President should have done—I get anchored.

From stress.

From ego.

From the illusion that the world needs me to function.

I just drop anchor.

So if the Cabinet calls again—tell them Bob's not available.

He's too still right now.

He's holding a cup of chai, not chaos.

He's anchored, not ambitious.

He's resting—not retiring.

Because sometimes, the most powerful move you can make in a world spinning madly... is to sit still.

And maybe, just maybe, you should too.

Stillness awaits.

And if the grandkids ask what you're doing, just smile and say,

"I'm doing something Vice Presidential—I'm taking care of my health..."

(If you would like to receive Bob's Banter as a daily column in your WhatsApp everyday, do send your name and phone number to bobshunter@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

Tradition, Law, and the Need for Balance

The letter by Marbiang Rymbai (ST dated 22nd July 2025) underscores a pressing challenge: reconciling Meghalaya's vibrant cultural heritage with the imperatives of constitutional governance. While festivals are a cornerstone of our identity, the coercive shutdown of central government offices and essential services during such events (even on local holidays) raises legal and ethical concerns that cannot be ignored. Recent incident is the forced closure of a postal office on the occasion of Behdeinkhlam.

Central institutions like banks and post offices function under Union laws, including the Negotiable Instruments Act, 1881, and directives from the Reserve Bank of India. These statutes establish a uniform framework for operations, ensuring equitable access to services for all citizens across India. Attempts to override these provisions through pressure tactics not only lack legal standing but also risk destabilizing the federal balance envisioned by India's Constitution.

The human cost of such disruptions is significant. When essential services are forcibly halted, vulnerable groups—farmers awaiting

crop loans, students needing time-sensitive documents, or elderly citizens reliant on pensions—face tangible hardships. The very communities these festivals aim to celebrate are often the ones disproportionately affected by such interruptions.

A proactive approach is needed to align cultural observances with institutional integrity. Clear communication of Union laws to local stakeholders, coupled with mechanisms to mediate conflicts, could prevent unlawful encroachments on national institutions. Equally critical is fostering a culture of advocacy that prioritizes dialogue over coercion. Cultural preservation, at its core, should strengthen social cohesion, not fracture it.

Meghalaya's enduring strength lies in its ability to honour tradition while upholding the principles of justice and inclusivity. By rejecting methods that impose exclusionary demands, we ensure that our cultural pride becomes a bridge—not a barrier—for unity in diversity.

While many NGOs in Meghalaya claim to act as guardians of cultural heritage, their role in coercing central government offices to shut down—even for local, non-state holidays—demands urgent scrutiny. These organizations, often self-appointed custodians of tradition, exploit community sentiment to advance demands that not only lack legal validity but also undermine national institutions.

By weaponizing festivals as tools of pressure, they prioritize symbolism over substance, disregarding the very citizens they claim to protect. Farmers, students, and pensioners bear the brunt of these disruptions, their livelihoods and dignity sacrificed at the altar of performative culturalism. True advocacy requires dialogue, not dictats. NGOs must ask: Does cultural pride justify violating federal law? Does tradition thrive when it silences the voices of those it marginalizes? Let us reject the conflation of coercion with celebration and demand accountability from those who abuse their influence.

Yours etc.,
Dr Omarlin Kyndiah,
Via email

Need to address stark poverty

I write to show my deep appreciation, yet horror for Salil Grewal's article, "Story of a Mother and her Daughter," TST (July 23, 2025). Appreciation for this most moving article; horror that in a world of mega billionaires, some do not even get enough to eat. That here we are at the threshold of the twenty-first century, and yet, a young mother and daughter must make do with sharing a gift of three pieces of toffee for breakfast. How did this mother feed herself when

pregnant with her daughter? How many pregnant women in rural Meghalaya lack basics, like food and medical care?

Is it that difficult to pull people out of such grim levels of poverty? What is wrong with providing every impoverished mother, especially single mothers, a base salary, alongside subsidized or free food, medical care, and education? Where there is a will, there is a way. All it takes is for the stakeholders to show grim determination, genuine altruism, and less corruption.

That a young mother and her child have to make do with three pieces of toffee for breakfast, sometimes lacking even this, is grounds for shame for all who have enough to get by. The dignity and integrity of the poor in India have always moved me.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

All roads need policing

With reference to your report, "Extortion Rides Road Accident Trick in City" (The Shillong Times, July 23, 2025), the rising incidents of drunkards and suspected drug addicts staging fake accidents to extort money from drivers is alarming and demands urgent attention. These scams, occurring mainly in specific areas, pose a serious law-and-order challenge and reflect a deeper social issue linked to

drug and alcohol addiction.

Drivers, if they remain alert and cautious, can avoid falling victim to such scams by not engaging in physical confrontation, informing the police immediately, refraining from making on-the-spot payments, and using dashcams for safety. Patrolling in vulnerable areas needs to be intensified, and rapid response teams should handle such incidents promptly. Strict enforcement of laws against extortionists and regular public awareness campaigns through social media, schools, and community programmes are important deterrents.

Drug awareness drives are conducted occasionally but need to be more frequent and result-oriented, involving community leaders and rehabilitated individuals to motivate addicts to seek help. Strengthening rehabilitation centres with medical detox, counselling, and vocational training, along with mandatory rehab for addicts involved in petty crimes, is essential to address the root cause.

Such measures are necessary not only on Shillong's roads but also in other towns and vulnerable areas of Meghalaya to ensure public safety.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj Chhetry,
Via email

The Dhankar surprise

The editorial "Dhankar springs a surprise" (ST July

23, 2025) made interesting

reading. The editorial highlights a pivotal moment, and one that echoes a broader tension between constitutional institutions and political authority. According to Congress leader P. Chidambaram, Vice President Jagdeep Dhankar's admission of impeachment motion against Justice Yashwant Varma crossed a political line, severing trust with the government. Though Dhankar cited health concerns upon resignation, the absence of fanfare or formal farewell in the Rajya Sabha suggests estrangement rather than graceful exit. The Deputy Chairman's muted announcement of vacancy and the rapid procedural closure further reinforces that interpretation. Viewing this within a systems framework, Dhankar's confrontation not only exposed the fraying threads of executive-judiciary relations, but also challenged the informal code that constitutional functionaries are expected to follow: discretion, alignment and institutional restraint. His stance however principled or procedural seems to have threatened the governing equilibrium.

Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
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.

"Making mistakes is a lot better than not doing anything."

— Billie Joe Armstrong

The Shillong Times

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Nationalism, Trump

PRESIDENT Donald Trump has called a halt to recruitments by IT companies from countries like India – and he has also asked them to stop setting up factories in China. This obviously follows a pattern and cannot be seen in isolation. Trump won elections, not once but twice, by whipping up the nationalist spirit. His stress, at an AI summit in Washington on Wednesday, was that tech companies that provided a whole lot of jobs should care more for their own country and create more jobs for Americans at home. The "globalist mindset" of hiring foreigners, he felt, has undercut the interests of America. While Trump has a point, it would appear that he is not being mindful of the realities on the ground. He has been whimsical, and more so during his second term in office. In a matter of a few months, he has already taken several retreats vis-à-vis policy propositions.

Trump's call reflects a mood that's steadily building up in the US against "domination" of "foreign" workers in the IT sector that has its eminent global base there. Reports were that the post-Covid19 period saw a revival of lost job opportunities there, but the gains were more for "foreigners," mainly Asians like Indian techies. The issue of nepotism, which is perhaps an import from India to the US, has also cropped up. Some top IT firms were sued by the department of labour there recently, citing bias in hiring and violations of wage rules. White, Hispanic and African American applicants were allegedly discriminated against in favour of Asian or Indian techies. Recent reports had said Indian nationals received more than 70 per cent of the H-1B visas, which was introduced in the 90's for hiring of techies from outside the US. CEOs of Indian origin head nearly 20 Fortune 500 companies in the US. Some of them face allegations of 'bias' towards Asians in the recruitment process. Notably, however, the companies sued by the US labour department insist their recruitment were based purely on "experience and merit."

When it comes to private companies, their ultimate aim is profit and top-positioning, both of which make it imperative that they employ competent personnel. This is a truth everywhere, for most part, though other considerations play lesser roles. Trump, a billionaire businessman himself for decades, cannot be impervious to such ground realities. Techies from India who work in the US would have us believe that, despite Trump's aggressive stands against Indian hirings, the US companies cannot do without them. In quality of work, experience and other parameters for hiring, they are head and shoulders above others. Since the 1990s, when the IT boom started in the US, Indian techies are increasingly being preferred; and over the years, some of them came into top positions, as in Microsoft. It will be an appreciable idea if Americans qualify themselves to run their companies in future by virtue of their efficiency – the ultimate yardstick for both work and leadership.

The Shillong Times allows me to write a series of articles on the nature, structure, and mechanics of Indian democracy. I plan to work within a framework that utilizes micro examples and extrapolates them to the broader context, enabling the reader to gain deeper and more comprehensive insights. I would like to begin by examining how the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system influences election outcomes in the state's legislative constituencies, using specific examples.

Meghalaya's democratic journey reveals a story that is both fascinating and troubling. The 'First-Past-the-Post' system deeply impacts a small state with fewer than 2.1 million voters. The seemingly simple process of FPTP produces outcomes that contradict the core principle of majority rule, which, in theory, is the cornerstone of a strong democracy. The voter turnout in Meghalaya typically hovers around 75%, significantly higher than in many other parts of India. Such high participation might suggest a strong connection between voter engagement and election results, but that is not entirely the case. Genuine voters eventually realize that they have been wronged due to the mathematics of FPTP. Winning candidates often secure just a third of the total votes, with margins sometimes being fewer than a few hundred votes, or even less in some cases.

It's helpful to step back and understand why and how this happens. Meghalaya's political landscape is highly fragmented. Regional parties, such as the UDP, the HSPDP, and more recently, the PDF and VPP, coexist with national parties like the INC, BJP, AITC, and the NPP. In many constituencies where seven or eight candidates often compete. When votes are split among many candidates, the winner doesn't need a majority – just a plurality (meaning the candidate who gets more votes than any other). The FPTP system doesn't care if sixty or seventy percent of voters support other candidates; it simply declares the candidate with the most votes as the winner.

The numbers reveal the distortion. Let's compare two elections. In the 2018 assembly elections, the National People's Party formed the government with 20.6% of the polled votes but won 32.2% of seats (19/59). It

FPTP: A flawed colonial relic of Democracy!

By K N Kumar

formed the government with post-election allies, while the INC, which had received a larger share (28.5%) and got 21 seats, sat in the opposition. In 2023, the NPP increased its vote share to 31.48% and secured 43.3% of the seats (26), nearly half the assembly. However, this still meant that 68.52% of voters had chosen someone other than the winning candidates.

On the ground, the situation is even more stark. Over the last five assembly elections, at least a dozen candidates have won with fewer than 1,000 votes in Meghalaya. In the 2023 elections, the candidate from Dadengre won by only an 18-vote margin. Similar small margins occurred in Song-sak, Mairang, Mawhati, and

by the quirks of FPTP.

Supporters of FPTP often claim that the system's main strength is the stability it offers. They argue it avoids gridlock seen in proportional representation by producing clear majorities and decisive governments. However, in Meghalaya and the larger Northeastern region, the situation is different. Instead of creating stability, FPTP in these small hill states has frequently led to fragile coalitions, shifting alliances, and governments formed not by the people's actual choice but through post-election negotiations. Let's look at this closely now.

Between 1998 and 2008, Meghalaya experienced five different governments, with some lasting only a few months. The 2008–2013

"Winning candidates often secure just a third of the total votes, with margins sometimes being fewer than a few hundred votes, or even less in some cases."

other constituencies. At the national level, the situation is essentially the same. In India's 2024 General Elections, only 6 out of 543 Members of Parliament (MPs) were elected with more than 50% of the votes cast in their constituencies, meaning 98.9% of MPs won with a plurality rather than a majority. Data from the Election Commission of India (ECI) further shows that 178 MPs (approximately one-third) won with 30% or less of the total votes cast, including 57 of the BJP's 240 MPs (23.75%), 30 of Congress's 99 MPs (30.3%), and 31 of the Samajwadi Party's 37 MPs (83.78%). This highlights how FPTP can result in winners who do not reflect the majority of voter preferences; particularly in multi-candidate races.

One clear point not to be missed here: regardless of which party wins, the combined vote share of the losing candidates is always higher than that of the winner. Just keep in mind that in this system, there are no prizes for second place and no representation for scattered but essential voices. These are not isolated cases but repeat patterns, election after election. Over the past fifty years, Meghalaya's governments have been formed not on clear majorities but on narrow pluralities facilitated

assembly term alone saw three chief ministers as alliances shifted and legislators defected. Even after the 2018 elections, when the NPP staked a claim to form the Government, it had to attract smaller parties and independents to form a government. The resulting coalition had enough members, but there was constant speculation about reshuffles, defections, and even no-confidence motions. This record challenges the idea that FPTP provides stability.

Across the North East, FPTP has caused similar distortions. In Nagaland in 2003, the Naga People's Front did not win a majority but formed a government by forging a post-election alliance with smaller parties. Such practices became so common in the country that new terms, such as 'resort politics' and 'number shopping,' have now entered the Indian political vocabulary. Manipur offers another example. In 2017, the Congress won twenty-eight seats, more than any other party, yet it was the BJP, with twenty-one seats, that formed the government by bringing in smaller parties and independents. In 2016, Arunachal Pradesh saw a major political upheaval when 43 of 44 Congress MLAs, led by Chief Minister Pema Khandu, de-

fected to the People's Party of Arunachal Pradesh (PPA). This shift followed months of instability, a Supreme Court ruling, and internal dissent within the Congress party. For the average voter, the party they chose to govern was no longer in power within months, replaced through manoeuvres entirely outside the ballot box. Over the past decade, such shifts have become so common that discussions of democracy in our country often take on a farcical tone.

The myth that FPTP guarantees stability is disproven by this historical record. FPTP has not stopped instability; it has just shifted the focus from pre-election campaigns to post-election negotiations. Rather than parties building broad platforms before voting, they depend on fragmented results and negotiate afterward. Instead of giving voters a clear voice in choosing who should govern, it gives disproportionate power to smaller groups of MLAs whose support becomes essential in hung legislatures. Far from creating stable governments, it has resulted in governments often forming coalitions of convenience.

What makes this situation even more paradoxical is the high voter turnout in these states. Literacy rates in Sikkim and Mizoram surpass ninety percent, and Meghalaya's is well above seventy-five. These voters can understand and engage with systems more advanced than simple FPTP arithmetic. Small constituencies could, under a different system, enable more responsive and representative governance. In the northeastern states, elections are marked by great enthusiasm, yet the governments that form do not truly reflect voters' preferences. It's a spectacle of narrow wins and post-election deals, all clothed in the rhetoric of majority rule. The irony is apparent. In the NER, where democracy is the most natural, its practice remains painfully incomplete. The FPTP system, in my view, is a flawed colonial relic that, like all other inherited relics, is grossly inadequate and defective. Still, the desire for change is weak because those who benefit from these distortions are the ones who must carry out reforms. We know that relics are useless, but we still keep them. That is the irony!

(The writer is a former IAS officer)

The Growing Challenge: AI vs. Authentic Learning

By Jairaj Chhetry

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has revolutionized classrooms, providing instant answers and compressing learning into quick, effortless searches. For students, it seems like a dream—ask a question, get an answer in seconds. But this convenience has a hidden cost. Instead of engaging with concepts, many students now submit AI-generated, ready-made responses without verifying facts or developing their own reasoning. This overdependence is gradually dulling curiosity, creativity, and self-problem-solving skills.

Classrooms are quietly becoming echo chambers of templated thoughts, where students copy and paste answers instead of thinking critically. If left unchecked, this trend may produce a generation proficient in using tools but lacking originality, analytical ability, and independent judgment.

Why Newspapers and Magazines Still Matter? In contrast to AI's algorithm-driven responses, newspapers and magazines provide a rich, human-centred approach to learning. Printed journalism is more than a collection of news items—it is a foundation for critical thinking. It helps students:

- Distinguish fact from opinion
- Identify bias and evaluate credibility
- Develop evidence-based reasoning and debate skills

Editorials, articles with in-depth analysis, and investigative reports train students to think deeply, cross-check facts, and engage in respectful argumentation. Magazines, with their detailed narratives and cultural references, bring real voices and human stories to life—perspectives that AI can only imitate, not truly understand.

Reading newspapers nurtures habits essential for responsible citizenship—fact-checking, analyzing multiple viewpoints, and forming independent opinions. It trains young minds to ask why and how, not just accept a quick, simplified answer.

What Research Tells Us?

Recent studies strongly support reviving print culture in education. The study made by the University of Reading, a public Research University located in Berkshire, England in 2024, revealed that students who regularly read newspapers performed significantly better in reasoning and debate than those relying mainly on

digital feeds. Similarly, research from MIT (2024) and Stanford University (2023) concluded that while AI excels in speed and data recall, it lacks emotional intelligence, cultural understanding, and human intuition—qualities developed through active reading, discussion, and reflection.

The Current Classroom Reality: Assignments today are often completed by simply feeding prompts into AI tools. The consequences are worrying:

- Reduced inquiry and independent research
- Monotonous, "carbon-copy" assignments
- Weakening habits of reading, verifying, and forming personal opinions

The once-common practice of reading newspapers and magazines—which encouraged debate, creativity, and curiosity—is disappearing fast.

Practical Steps to Restore Print Culture

Reintroducing newspapers and magazines to classrooms does not require complex reforms—just small, consistent steps:

1. Morning News Reading: Start the day with one major headline and an editorial, followed by a brief class discussion.
2. News Wall: Create a bulletin board where students post weekly news summaries, encouraging collective awareness.
3. Opinion Writing: Assign students to write short, evidence-based opinions on current events.
4. Letters to Editors: Encourage students to write responses to published articles, teaching clarity and persuasion.
5. Magazine Sharing Sessions: Once a month, let students present meaningful articles or interviews they have read, exposing peers to diverse perspectives.

The Bigger Impact: Bringing back newspapers and magazines does more than supply information—it revives the spirit of inquiry. Journalism is not merely about reporting; it is about thinking, questioning, and courageously expressing one's viewpoint.

AI will remain a valuable tool for education, but it must be balanced with traditional, thought-provoking methods. By restoring print media to classrooms, we can ensure that future generations grow up as curious, analytical, and confident thinkers—young minds who do not just accept answers but challenge them, seek truth, and contribute meaningfully to society.

Letters to the Editor

Needed stringent action on the Mawpat Forest plunder case

Editor,
I want to lend my support to the views of Toki Blah in his article "To Catch a Thief" (ST July 24, 2025). This article is a follow up to the Op Ed piece by Patricia Mukhim, "Stunning Silence on the Mawpat Forest Plunder" (ST July 19, 2025).

For generations we as tribal peoples have protected and stewarded the eco-systems we all depend on. Even today more than one-third of intact forest landscapes globally lie within the territories of Indigenous Peoples, thanks to their traditional knowledge, governance and social values of sharing and caring of Indigenous Peoples which even today hold keys that are valuable for well-being and climate solutions. Unfortunately, these systems are today being threatened by extractive industries, construction, development and our selfish, individualistic and unsustainable aspirations.

You Madam Editor and Toki Blah have raised an urgent awakening on what is happening to our Mei Ramew and what you called the "Mawpat Forest Plunder." We need urgent and

stringent actions in the Mawpat case and other similar situations. We as a people can neglect this only at our own peril.

Yours etc.,
Phrang Roy
Via email

Stuck in a rut like a broken record

Editor,
If one was to read, regularly and dispassionately, the articles and the letters to the editors, appearing in the paper, one would be tempted to assume that our society suffers from hypochondria. A surfeit of illnesses and fears are regularly discussed and debated. These range from the fear of being wiped out, the loss of culture, the fear of outsiders, the intolerance, the lopsided reservation, indifferent governance, inequality, vendors and footpaths, and what have you. The sky seems to be not just factually, but even metaphorically clouded, in Meghalaya.

I have yet to see the stock market, cryptocurrency, investing, online marketing, robotics, genetics, or AI capture the imagination of the various writers. And herein lies the real danger. We have to stop staring at our belly buttons and start looking outwards. It is the lack of economic and technological smartness which will spell

the doom for society and confine all of us to the bottom rung of existence.

This is what separates the tribes found in Andaman and Nicobar from the not so lost tribes of Israel. The latter matter— even with a small population and a tiny territory— and continue to have a major impact on the world. And let us not forget that for thousands of years they didn't even have a homeland. The isolated tribes of Andaman and Nicobar even with all the constitutional protection are more likely to be dusted off the pages of history than the Jews who have learnt to adapt to the world. The latter have managed to stand on their own feet and in the process also made a name for themselves. It may come as a surprise to you that the person who made our own Bombay rich was also a Jew called David Sassoon.

Like the wit says it is the money, honey.

Money talks and let us make no bones about it. And it is high time that economy and activities related to it, especially the benefits of fast changing technology assume centre stage in our conversation, more so if survival be our primary concern. The rest will fall into place. Otherwise one can continue to beat about the bush and delude oneself.

Yours etc.,
Paramjit Singh Bakshi,
Via email

Democracy in the age of compromised media

Editor,
K N Kumar's article, Delusions of Democracy (ST July 18, 2025) is a hard-hitting reality on astronomical election costs in India with disturbing trends of unaccounted money. Will advocacy for stringent financial audits and transparent public disclosure of all election-related spending ever happen by the political class in India?

Contrasting voter behaviour of a stark divide between committed voters in the Northeast and the vote-buying culture in other regions especially in southern states is well known. It indicates societal disparities in democratic values. Will civic education to voters of economically weak section ever happen to make them responsible citizens across all the regions?

First-hand observations from a responsible IAS officer with Gandhian values and with experience in the EC lends authenticity to the narrative on the systemic weaknesses and societal character's impact on democracy. Will institutional reforms from the EC happen with strict enforcement through observers at the

grassroots level?

Highlighting structural flaws in electoral system with the critique of the 'First Past The Post' (FPTP) system is insightful as it stresses the need for electoral reforms towards proportional representation. Will the polity in India honestly initiate a national discourse involving policymakers, scholars, and citizens on the merits and models of electoral reforms?

By warning against the hollowing out of democracy and media manipulation K N Kumar has rightly warned about the erosion of democratic ethos due to compromised media and an uninformed electorate. Will this push for media independence legislation ever happen in the near future? Is India ready for voter literacy campaigns to strengthen well informed and responsible participation?

Yours etc.,
Dr CS Rao,
Bengaluru.

India-UK sign Free Trade Agreement

Editor,
During his visit to UK, Prime Minister Modi will sign the Free Trade Agreement as both countries were negotiating for years on this. This is UK's fourth

FTA after Brexit. Moreover India has FTAs with Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Korea, Japan, Australia, UAE, Mauritius, the 10-nation bloc ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), and four European nations' bloc EFTA (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland). India is also currently negotiating FTAs with the US, Oman, the European Union (EU), Peru, and Israel.

India and the UK have been negotiating a deal for years which will be completed now and after passing it in the Parliament the same will be implemented by next year. This is India's first such agreement with another nation in over a decade. Bilateral trade between the two countries was at USD 55 billion in 2023/24. The deal includes a double contribution convention—also known as a social security pact which will help Indian workers, and it will exempt Indian professionals and companies from social security contributions in the UK for three years which is a huge win for India. The idea behind it is to stop employers and employees from the burden of contributing to social security in multiple countries.

The FTA is extremely detailed—comprising 26 chapters on goods, services, investment and Intellectual Property Rights. India and

the UK are negotiating a Bilateral Investment Treaty on a parallel track. The deal will allow 99 per cent of Indian exports to the UK to fall under zero-duty category. This will boost labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, leather, apparel and footwear, toys, marine products, gems and jewellery. Many of these currently face tariffs ranging from 4 per cent to 16 percent. Engineering goods, auto components, electric and hybrid vehicles, and sports goods will also benefit. The double contribution pact will be of great help to Indian workers in the UK. It will exempt them from paying for social security for a period of three years.

The India UK free trade agreement is a gamechanger even as the talks with the US are still continuing and it is not known when it will be finalized but the good news is from UK where FTA will come into operation in due course. The UK will see tariff reductions on luxury items such as Scotch whisky and premium cars. In more ways than one it is a win-win situation for both the countries. The UK remains a key economic partner for India and is also the sixth-largest investor in India, with cumulative investments of around 36 billion dollars. India itself is a key contributor to the British economy with at least 1,000 Indian companies operating in the country, employing over one lakh people

with a total investment of 20 billion dollars. This is the UK's most extensive trade deal since Brexit and India's most significant agreement with a Western economy in over a decade.

This is an agreement that India has signed after overhauling its approach to trade liberalisation. The India-UK agreement marks a new era in India's economic diplomacy. It reflects India's growing assertiveness in the domain of foreign economic policy and other developed countries who are looking to seal a deal with India must duly take note of it. It signals India's new-found willingness to integrate with the global market but it also demonstrates its resolve to do it only on terms beneficial to the country.

The days of signing FTAs for the sake of appearing liberal and seeking validation from economists are over for India. In the face of global headwinds, New Delhi has shown that it is willing to walk the talk of trade liberalisation with the developed world – but only when it also boosts the country's own economy.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

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

"If you change the way you look at things
the things you look at change."
— Wayne Dyer

The Shillong Times

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Climate Change Warning

CHIEF Minister Conrad Sangma has warned the citizenry of the devastating effects of climate change which is no longer "theoretical or abstract but for real." It's intuitive to know that in recent times when Shillong experiences heavy rainfall, Sohra remains dry with only the fog and mist covering the landscape but very little rainfall. That Shillong – a hill station known for its balmy weather is now another hot and humid city hovering between 27-30 degrees centigrade is enough evidence that climate is changing even while the people of Meghalaya seem indifferent to this change other than complaining about the rising heat. Most rivers flowing towards the Umiam Lake no longer flow with the same intensity owing to deficient rainfall. The reasons are not far to seek. Rapid deforestation for construction purposes; for extractive mining of limestone, boulders and sand for export to Bangladesh and for keeping the timber factories running at full steam is what is denuding the forests of Meghalaya. The rivers too are not in their natural state of health except when they are beyond the human habitations, deep inside the forests

The fact that mining activities are also happening in and around the Nokrek Biosphere Reserve as was recently reported demands stern action from the State Forest Department and the Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change. All the important rivers and streams of the Garo Hills region rise from the Nokrek Range, of which the river Simsang known as Someshwari when it emerges into Bangladesh at Baghmara, is the most prominent. How can coal mining even be contemplated around this sensitive biosphere? Where are the guardians of the environment namely the traditional institutions and the autonomous district councils? Are they not vested with the mandate to conserve and not trade off every conceivable natural resource inherited from the ancestors?

Meghalaya's problem is its multi-layered governance system each one doing what it chooses to without any accountability. Add to that an indifferent public that will not raise its voice except when the problem hits too close for comfort. This public indifference is what emboldens the marauders of forests and community land. At the risk of being repetitive, the only way to salvage what's left of our land and forests is for the state to carry out a cadastral survey, so that it is established once and for all who owns how much land and whether community owned land still exists – where such lands are located and their extent. It should not be difficult to do that now with modern technology. If the state government resists this step for whatever reason then the public must demand the cadastral survey. This will indicate very clearly the number of landless people in Meghalaya and why they were not allocated community land or whether they have been forced to sell or mortgage their land. The very purpose of governance is to ensure equity not to exacerbate poverty and landlessness. Public discussions around this issue are imperative. Climate Change will unfortunately hit the marginalised and the poor the hardest!

Talking when Fighting Ends

By Jaideep Saikia

suspicion. Furthermore, it is yet to be understood as to why a "Framework Agreement" had to be signed in the first place, and with so much fanfare, especially if it were to be kept a secret. The only rational explanation seems to be that New Delhi wanted to "inform" the rest of the country that conflict in its eastern borderlands has been resolved, when in effect it is not the case. If this perception is true, then it is not an only unsound policy, but one that is fraught with grave danger to India's national security. After all, all that has been achieved since the "historic" agreement is suspicion, criticism and inter-group rivalry.

Also, in the process of wooing the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isaac Muivah) (NSCN (IM)) and

I also wish to take the opportunity of psycho-profiling a belligerent group before it enters into a ceasefire: an imperative that might have escaped the high offices of New Delhi. It must be understood that a heightened sense of caution guides belligerent parties before they enter into a political reconciliation process. The primary concern of such groups is whether the stronger party—as asymmetry characterises almost all cases of conflict between belligerents and constituted authority—would permit an honourable solution, which would be acceptable to the belligerent group and the constituency it seeks to represent. Such groups also exercise caution as they sense that a coaxed entrance into a political process could be a ploy of the stronger party to

Belligerence in the North East, for instance, appeals to the strategic calculus of China and Pakistan even as such countries seek to pin down the Indian army to the region and away from both their primary duties at the border and the growing intransigence in Kashmir, the real battlefield. However, the gaffe which New Delhi seems to be continually making is by tom-tomming its piecemeal achievements.

alienating the NSCN (Khaplang), precious lives have been lost. The attack on the 6 Dogra Regiment soldiers in Manipur's Chandel on 4 June 2015 when 18 soldiers of the unit was killed is an important case in point. The abrogation of ceasefire with the NSCN (K) on 27 March, 2015 (when New Delhi could have humoured it by assuaging hurt sentiments), according to me, led to the attack on the Indian army by a group of insurgents comprising of the NSCN (K), Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup and the Kamatapur Liberation Organisation.

The turf has become murkier with reports suggesting that the (Manipur) Valley Based Insurgent Groups have come into an agreement with the Myanmar army after the 1 February 2021 putsch in Myanmar. While the "understanding" has been analysed to be a marriage of convenience, the fact of the matter is that it has engineered an about-face for the Indian security management. Whereas, in the pre-1 February 2021 scenario, Naxpyidaw—at the behest of New Delhi—had acted against the Indian Insurgent Groups (IIGs) billeted in Myanmar by way of two robust military operations—Op Sunrise I and II—the present poses a 180 degree turn with the insurgents acting in tandem with the same dispensation which New Delhi had hoped to utilise against the North East insurgents.

"wear them out" by engaging them in protracted negotiations. But notwithstanding such predicaments compromises are often made when a belligerent party perceives a stalemate in the movement and when conflict fatigue begins to set in, as also when they realise that the populace among which they operate are building consensus to force the belligerents to enter into dialogue.

In such scenarios belligerents try to shape the environment in an array of ways, which may range from escalating the level of violence to internationalising the movement. The motivation is to force the stronger party to open channels for dialogue as the moves of the belligerent party becomes increasingly unacceptable. However, the movement from intention to actual institution of political process is usually long drawn: most belligerent groups put forward conditions that may not be acceptable to the stronger party. But non-acceptable conditions are usually made only by way of bargaining counters, with a comprehension that a climb-down to acceptable conditions would eventually take place, and ones which were actually intended by the belligerents. Sincerity of both parties to resolve conflict by adhering to the principle of mutual accommodation and by prolonging the peace dividend when fighting ends is crucial at this stage. This is primarily

because of not only the possibility that subterfuges may be engineered by hardliners among belligerents who feel that they will not be given their due in a post settlement scenario, but also because of the presence of—as aforesaid—spoiling efforts by vested interests. Back channeling and secret parleys with earnest mandate are best suited to navigate the process at such junctures: publicity normally results in devious objectives coming into play, derailing the political process in its infancy.

The sense of mistrust that prevails among the stakeholders of the Naga Peace Process and the growing antagonism between people that should have come together to cobble out a solution that is all-inclusive has become the most palpable of banes. The manner in which the dialogue has careened out of control when it could have been salvaged is an observable fact that has dawned upon all right-thinking observers. All-inclusive charity and correct confidence building should have guided state action. The ad-hocism that has hitherto characterised the manner in which the state has been ordaining for the longest running insurgency in the world is a theme that clearly eludes reason.

Comprehension of such sage articulation and course correction demands that a correct mustering exercise be undertaken. Even as the Naga people and the other on-looking groups await Raisina Hills offer, the most important aspect that the state should be examining is the immediate anvil of a peace committee headed by a non-partisan personage such as former union home secretary, G.K. Pillai. His knowledge of the North East is extraordinary and he commands great respect among the people of the North East.

Other equally astute observers of Naga affairs such as Lt Gen (Retd) K. Himalay Singh and Patricia Mukhim could be incorporated into such a group. After all, quite clearly the aftermath of a "compromise" that would be offered may not gratify all stakeholders and there could be murmurings of dissatisfaction in the region. In such a setting there would be a need for a set of people—without state moorings—who would be able to act as a "uniting buffer" and ferry the message that a "war" is truly ending. The group can also act as both shields and safeguards in the extremely crucial period that characterises the "end-of-the-road" scenario. Foresight and vision—if exercised with both care and caution—could well witness the gifting of a well-earned "Independence Day" present (15 August 2025) that would conclude the present impasse in rightful cheer.

[Jaideep Saikia is a foremost conflict theorist of India and bestselling author]

Khursheed Ahmad Chohan VRS Union Territory of Jammu Kashmir

By Vedant Choudhary

Custodial violence is an unfortunate reality in Indian prisons. Although the Supreme Court has issued a number of guidelines to prevent the same, the ill continues to exist. On July 21, a division bench of the Supreme Court gave its judgment in Khursheed Ahmad Chohan v Union Territory of Jammu Kashmir. The appellant in this case, a victim of custodial torture sought remedies to ensure fair investigation into the case, which was granted by the court. This judgment is important as it is one of the few judgments on the safeguard of the remedial measures of a victim after custodial torture.

The facts of this case in brief are thus: The appellant is a police constable in the Jammu Kashmir Police. The appellant alleges he has suffered severe custodial torture at the hands of his superior officials for six days. On the sixth day he was taken to the hospital, and an FIR was lodged making it appear he had attempted to commit suicide. Upon learning about the appellants condition, his wife approached the Station House Officer (SHO), the Senior Superintendent of Police, and later the Deputy Inspector General of Police to register an FIR. However, her request was not heard.

She then filed two petitions before the High Court of Jammu & Kashmir. The first petition, sought the quashing of the FIR alleging attempt to commit suicide, and the second, seeking either a direction of the High Court mandating the SHO to register an FIR, or if the High Court found it appropriate, to transfer the case to the Central Bureau of Investigation to ensure fair and impartial investigation.

The High Court found it fit to not quash the FIR alleging attempt to suicide, and to not transfer the case to CBI. It however directed the SSP to conduct a preliminary enquiry into the allegations, and register an FIR if found fit. Aggrieved, the wife filed a Special Leave Petition before the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court has directed the mandatory registration of FIR. While doing so it has referred to the landmark judgment in Lalita Kumari v State of UP (2013), where it was held that wherever the facts disclosed to the police indicate the commission of a cognizable offence, it is mandatory for the police to register an FIR. The Supreme Court struck down the order of the High Court directing a preliminary enquiry. In Lalita Kumari the court made specific exceptions of cases where preliminary enquiry was prohibited. No preliminary enquiry can be conducted by the police where the informant alleges

an offence against public servants, or in cases of custodial torture.

The Supreme Court has ordered quashing of the FIR. For this it relied upon its own judgment in State of Haryana vs. Bhajan Lal (1992), where it was held that an FIR can be quashed if (i) disclosed no offence, or (ii) on the face of it, the FIR appears to be motivated by vengeance.

The Supreme Court has also ordered that the case file be transferred to the CBI to ensure fair and impartial investigation. It noted that courts should be cautious in transferring cases to the CBI, ensuring not to overburden the agency. However if it is certain that a fair investigation cannot be carried out by the state police machinery, the case may be transferred to the CBI.

Why is this Judgment important?

It is beyond debate that we have not been able to completely root out custodial torture from Indian prisons. This comes even after the Supreme Court has issued several guidelines, and safeguards to address and prevent custodial violence, most notably in DK Basu v. Union of India. The present case is significant as it provides a comprehensive ruling on all remedial measures available to the victim after custodial torture.

One of the first challenges faced by a victim of custodial torture is the refusal of the police to register an FIR. It would be unrealistic to expect impartiality from the police in registering such complaints. The FIR would have to be registered either by the very officials responsible for the custodial violence, or their colleagues.

Hypothetically, even if an FIR is registered, it is unlikely that the investigation would be conducted fairly and impartially. The police officers conducting the investigation would either be the same accused in the offence, or their colleagues, making it therefore highly likely that the investigation could be tainted, witnesses could be threatened or evidence could be destroyed.

It is also highly likely that a false FIR is registered by the police to explain the injuries that the victim has suffered. It is crucial that such an FIR be quashed to prevent injustice.

In this judgment, the Court has directly addressed all three of these critical issues, which follow custodial torture, that is, non-registration of FIRs, lack of impartial investigations, and quashing of false FIRs, thus setting an important precedent on custodial torture.

(The writer is a Law Student at Symbiosis Law School Pune)

Letters to the Editor

Let us not abandon what's ours

Editor
Let us abandon what is not ours—what does not truly belong to our hearts, our culture, our spirit. To hold on to what is ours, to what is pure and true, is to preserve our identity, our dignity, and our future. I write this with a heavy heart, burdened by the troubling signs we see around us in our tranquil Garo Hills, once vibrant with life, hope, and tradition. We now face a growing darkness—acts of violence, hatred, and despair that threaten to tear us apart.

Too frequently, we hear stories that send shivers down our spines—brutal murders, heartbreaking suicides, vandalism, and thefts, all born of wrong choices and misguided paths. It's painful to witness the erosion of our values, and sometimes we wonder: Is this really who we are? Yet, we must

confront the uncomfortable truth: Yes, this is part of our reality now, and each of us carries a piece of the responsibility for the changes that need to take place.

Why is our peaceful Garo Hills morphing into a territory of fear and discontent? Why are the values that once bound us together beginning to slip through our fingers?

The answer lies in the weakening of our roots—our culture, our faith, and our moral foundation. In days gone by, our churches, community leaders, and elders guided us with love, compassion, and a steadfast sense of duty. They cared deeply for the sick, the needy, and the lonely, and their spirit of kindness lingers in the corridors of our memories. But now, more than ever, we need that spirit to rejuvenate our communities.

Families that once stood firm on principles of respect and discipline are drifting away from the tenets that fostered our pride. Virtues like respect for our elders, kindness, and humility are more vital now than ever.

However, Western influences and fleeting trends are reshaping our mental and moral landscapes. We must remember that what truly makes us strong and resilient lies not in imitation but in authenticity—embracing our true selves, our heritage, and our values.

Our youth are ensnared in a web of drugs and vandalism. Instead of fleeing from these challenges, we must tackle them head-on. It's painful to see liquor shops cropping up near schools and temples, fostering environments where our young ones can easily succumb to harmful temptations. We've let our guard down, but it is not too late to reverse this troubling tide.

Change begins with us—parents, teachers, leaders, and the community at large. We need to reestablish respect, kindness, discipline, and love as the core values that guide our actions. Let's encourage sports, create safe communal spaces, and emphasize teachings that truly matter—our values, our faith, and our culture.

In the fond memories of our past, we had family figures, the Mamas (maternal uncles) and the Adas (brothers), who took on the noble duty of guiding the youth, bringing them back to the right path—not through harsh punishment, but through love and accountability. Discipline was a gentle hand guiding us rather than a military-style reprimand.

In school assemblies, teachers and headmasters imparted moral lessons to their students, recognizing the importance of shaping character alongside education. Now, it often feels like genuine disciplining is misconstrued as moral policing. Where have we erred? Have we forgotten the importance of nurturing disciplined and morally upright citizens?

Many individuals flaunt their affluence, driving ostentatious SUVs, living in luxury that only they can comprehend perhaps to impress those around them? I understand the necessity of vehicles, but must they come laden with the burden

of envy and comparison? It is vital to assess our motivations. Are we blinded by worldly pursuits, neglecting what truly matters?

As we ponder these difficult truths, we must ask ourselves: has our conscience withered away? Are we, the elders and leaders of our communities, doing enough to guide our young towards the light?

It is time to rise together, invoking the spirit of our ancestors, reclaiming our essence and values. We must abandon the distractions that do not serve us and focus on nurturing a culture of love, respect, and unity. Only then can we shape a promising future for the Garo Hills—a future where our children can thrive with hearts full of hope and souls anchored in dignity. Together, let us embrace what is ours, for it is in this reclaiming that we will find our way back to ourselves.

Yours etc.,
Chanella Marak,
Via email

Urgent need to address poor Jio connectivity in Tura

Editor,
After transitioning from BSNL—whose services were already inconsistent—I was shocked to discover that Jio's network in Tura is even more unreliable. The data speed is so poor that basic internet functions, such as opening a simple webpage, have become nearly impossible. In this age of 5G/LTE, experiencing connections at negligible kbps is not only disappointing, it is also a waste of our hard-earned money.

The data connectivity is abysmally poor, with internet speeds often dropping to negligible kilobits per second—a situation that is completely unacceptable in the current age of 4G, LTE, and now 5G technologies. Despite being one of the most subscribed networks in the region, Jio's data services in Tura are unreliable and virtually unusable for essential daily tasks such as

browsing, attending virtual meetings, or using basic applications. This results not only in inconvenience but also in significant financial and professional losses for users who depend on mobile internet services for their work and studies.

I, therefore, earnestly urge the concerned authorities of Reliance Jio and the Department of Telecommunications to investigate the matter seriously and take immediate corrective measures to improve the network infrastructure and restore reliable service in the region.

Your kind consideration in highlighting this issue will go a long way in ensuring better digital connectivity for the people of Tura.

Yours etc.,
Dr. Debabrata Das
Tura

Disregard for High Court order

Editor,
Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, I would like to highlight a

pressing issue concerning the increasing number of stray dogs in Shillong and the lack of enforcement of existing legal protections.

The Hon'ble High Court has clearly stated that stray dogs are to be sheltered and protected, yet the situation on the ground remains tragic. Street dogs roam without care, often sleep on roads, and many are hit by speeding vehicles at night. No effective shelters, feeding points, or sterilization initiatives appear to be in place in many areas.

This is not just a matter of animal rights, but a question of public responsibility, legal compliance, and moral decency. I urge the concerned authorities to act swiftly in cooperation with local NGOs and citizens.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request
A Concerned Resident,
Via email

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

Ghosted by friend? 4 expert tips on how to handle hurt

When we talk about "ghosting", we usually think it relates to dating. But what happens when you've been ghosted by someone you've known for years - your childhood best friend, a parent, a child? These disappearances can be harder to explain, and even harder to heal from.

It's also surprisingly common. For instance, one study showed 38.6% of people have been ghosted by a friend.

So why do people ghost those closest to them? What impact does it have on those left behind? How do you begin to move on? What is ghosting?

Ghosting is when someone abruptly, or gradually, cuts off all communication without explanation. Whether it's a friend, family member or love interest, the signs are much the same - messages left on read or calls ignored. Sometimes you're blocked.

Ghosting doesn't just happen online. It can also play out in person, when someone deliberately ignores you - avoiding eye contact, refusing attempts to engage in conversation, pretending you're not there.

Unlike relationships that gradually wither over time, or end abruptly after an argument, ghosting is a one-sided withdrawal from a relationship that happens without closure.

For the person left behind, it can feel like grief.

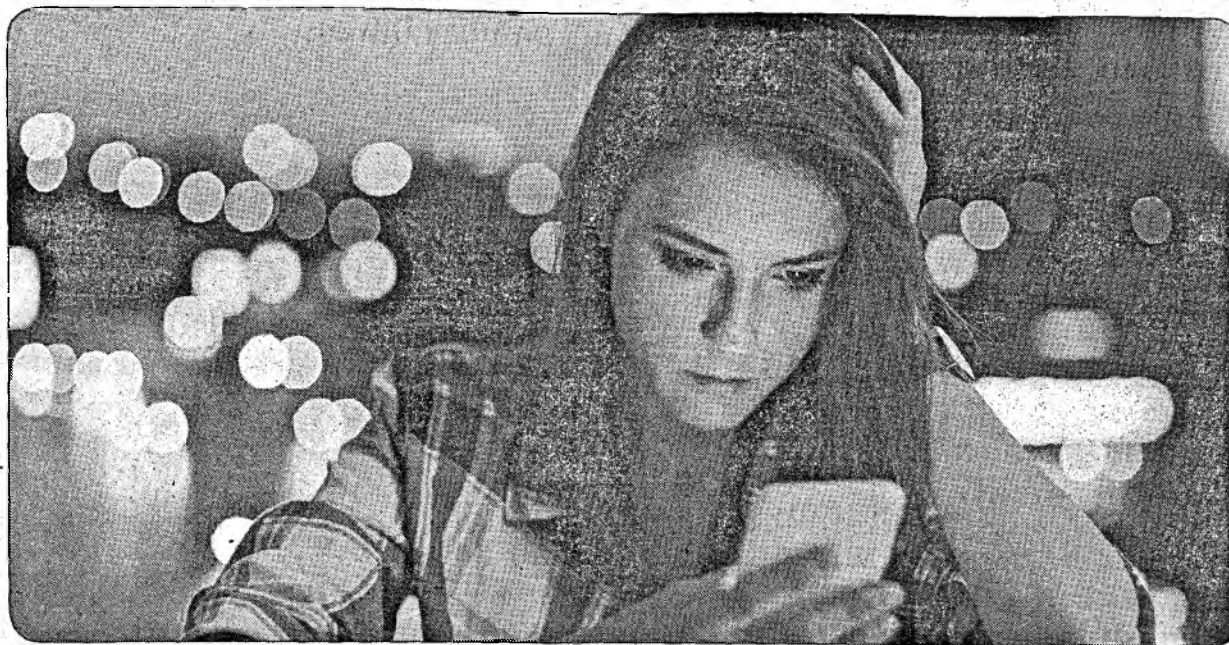
Why do people ghost family and friends?

People often ghost friends for the same reasons they ghost romantic partners.

Ghosting is more common - and considered more acceptable - in brief or casual romantic relationships or friendships. That's when people may ghost because they lose interest, wish to avoid confrontation, or find it easier than facing the discomfort of ending things directly.

In longer-term relationships, ghosting may stem from incompatibility, be prompted by different priorities, physical distance, or growing apart over time.

Major life transitions - such as becoming a parent, entering the workforce, moving, or going through



a divorce - can often provide the catalyst for someone to shrink their social network.

In some cases, ghosting is driven by self-preservation or concerns for personal safety, particularly when ghosting involves family members.

People report ghosting in response to toxic, emotionally draining, or abusive relationships, often when previous attempts to resolve issues were met with abuse or aggression. In such instances, ghosting isn't so much an avoidance strategy, but a last resort to preserve someone's safety and psychological wellbeing.

Ghosting has also been linked to certain personality traits. One study found people who reported ghosting others tended to score higher in narcissism (tend towards entitlement and lack of empathy) and borderline traits (so have trouble regulating emotions and are impulsive).

Why does it hurt so much?

People often ghost as they hope to spare the other person the pain of rejection. But that is rarely the case.

Being ghosted by someone you've been close to for a long time is often associated with grief, much like the death of the loved one. After the

initial shock, there is often anger and sadness.

Ghosting also involves "ambiguous loss". This ambiguity - the uncertainty and lack of closure - can almost freeze the grief process, making it particularly hard to move on.

In addition to grief-like emotions, ghosting is also often associated with self-blame, rumination, feelings of worthlessness, and trust issues that can affect how someone relates to others in the future.

How to cope if you've been ghosted

There's no easy fix and you can't force someone to communicate with you if they don't want to. But research points to some strategies that may help you move on and ease the pain: -Acknowledge your feelings.

Grief-like emotions are a normal reaction to being ghosted. Accept your emotions and express them in healthy ways. This is better than suppressing them, which is linked to depression, low self-esteem and reduced wellbeing.

-Seek social support.

Grief support is linked to a range of mental health benefits. Talk about your experience with friends, family or a mental health professional. This

can help reduce feeling of isolation, and low self-worth. Greater social support is also associated with post-traumatic growth - positive psychological change that can emerge after a challenging life event.

-Choose self-compassion over rumination.

It's easy to get caught in the trap of replaying what happened and wondering what went wrong. But this can prolong distress and make it harder to move on. Instead treat yourself as you would a close friend - with kindness, compassion and care. Self-compassion has been linked to reduced rumination, anxiety and depression. Exercise, mindfulness and spending time in nature are examples of self-care with similar psychological benefits.

-Create your own closure.

Being ghosted can often leave you stuck in a cycle of uncertainty and unanswered questions. You may never get an explanation and waiting for answers will only make it harder to move on. Writing a letter you don't send can help create closure. This form of expressive writing can help you articulate your thoughts and emotions and make sense of your experience - and is linked to a range of psychological benefits. (The Conversation)

Germ and public pools

On hot summer days, few things are more refreshing than a dip in the pool. But have you ever wondered if the pool is as clean as that crystal blue water appears? As an immunologist and infectious disease specialist, I study how germs spread in public spaces and how to prevent the spread. I even teach a course called "The Infections of Leisure" where we explore the risks tied to recreational activities and discuss precautions, while also taking care not to turn students into germophobes.

Swimming, especially in public pools and water parks, comes with its own unique set of risks - from minor skin irritations to gastrointestinal infections. But swimming also has a plethora of physical, social and mental health benefits. With some knowledge and a little vigilance, you can enjoy the water without worrying about what might be lurking beneath the surface.

The reality of pool germs

Summer news headlines and social media posts often spotlight the "ick-factor" of communal swimming spaces. These concerns do have some merit. The good news is that chlorine, which is widely used in pools, is effective at killing many pathogens. The not-so-good news is that chlorine does not work instantly - and it doesn't kill everything. Every summer, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issues alerts about swimming-related outbreaks of illness caused by exposure to germs in public pools and water parks.

A 2023 CDC report tracked over 200 pool-associated outbreaks from 2015 to 2019 across the US, affecting more than 3,600 people. These outbreaks included skin infections, respiratory issues, ear infections and gastrointestinal distress. Many of the outcomes from such infections are mild, but some can be serious.

Germ, disinfectants

Even in a pool that's properly treated with chlorine, some pathogens can linger for minutes to days. One of the most common culprits is Cryptosporidium, a microscopic germ that causes watery diarrhea. This single-celled parasite has a tough outer shell that allows it to survive in chlorine-treated water for up to 10 days. It spreads when fecal matter - often from someone with diarrhea -

enters the water and is swallowed by another swimmer. Even a tiny amount, invisible to the eye, can infect dozens of people. Another common germ is Pseudomonas aeruginosa, a bacterium that causes hot tub rash and swimmer's ear. Viruses like norovirus and adenovirus can also linger in pool water and cause illness. Swimmers introduce a range of bodily residues to the water, including sweat, urine, oils and skin cells. These substances, especially sweat and urine, interact with chlorine to form chemical by-products called chloramines that may pose health risks.

These byproducts are responsible for that strong chlorine smell. A clean pool should actually lack a strong chlorine odour, as well as any other smells, of course. It is a common myth that a strong chlorine smell is a good sign of a clean pool. In fact, it may actually be a red flag that means the opposite - that the water is contaminated and should perhaps be avoided.

How to play it safe

These 10 tips can help you avoid germs at the pool: 1) Shower before swimming. Rinsing off for at least one minute removes most dirt and oils on the body that reduce chlorine's effectiveness.

2) Avoid the pool if you're sick, especially if you have diarrhea or an open wound. Germs can spread quickly in water.

3) Try to keep water out of your mouth to minimize the risk of ingesting germs.

4) Don't swim if you have diarrhea to help prevent the spread of germs.

5) If diagnosed with cryptosporidiosis, often called "crypto," wait two weeks after diarrhea stops before returning to the pool.

6) Take frequent bathroom breaks. For children and adults alike, regular bathroom breaks help prevent accidents in the pool.

7) Check diapers hourly and change them away from the pool to prevent fecal contamination.

8) Dry your ears thoroughly after swimming to help prevent swimmer's ear.

9) Don't swim with an open wound - or at least make sure it's completely covered with a waterproof bandage to protect both you and others.

10) Shower after swimming to remove germs from your skin. (The Conversation)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, July 27, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

A mature and steady year lies ahead. This powerful Moon-Saturn (Moon quincunx (150°) Saturn) connection heightens your emotional depth and enhances your communication skills, especially in one-on-one settings. You'll express yourself more confidently and respectfully, earning admiration from those around you. Career advancement is likely, with recognition and rewards for your consistency and integrity. Business travel may bring long-term benefits. Your financial strength will grow steadily, and investments made now will be secure and fruitful. Love may bloom unexpectedly with someone intelligent and emotionally stable. The relationship could become a turning point in your life. You'll also feel drawn toward spirituality, charity, and social upliftment. This is a year to build, nurture, and elevate.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You need the energies, companionship, and support of other people, and they too draw upon you a great deal. You need space and contact with others in order to feel content. You are blessed with intuition and foresight which leads you in the right direction. You seem to need a good friend with whom you can share your ideas. You focus on balancing your personal interests and objectives with what would be best for a significant other. It's important to give others credit and recognition, and to attempt to harmonize and include others rather than to go solo for the time being.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) This is an especially introspective phase during which you have the chance to truly uncover your personal strengths and talents. On a more practical level, you may be dealing with joint finances and shared resources now more than usual. This is an excellent time under which you bring more harmony and pleasant interactions in your relationships with loved ones. All which is deeply personal comes into focus now. Intimate matters are especially important to you during this period. Just how well you are handling your life comes up for inspection. You are more willing than usual to explore life's secrets. Research uncovers new material that allows you to develop a better overall picture of the events.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You feel fun loving, energetic, and willing to explore new ideas. Financial benefits may come your way. Stress may crop up at unexpected turns and this would require you to look at some lifestyle changes and even incorporate some techniques like exercise and meditation. You would focus on intimacy with a partner, or simply retreat a little from the hectic pace of life. This is an excellent time to create a budget or financial plan, or to rid yourself of bad habits that undermine your sense of personal power and self-mastery.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You display great skills in sports, competitive exams, physical activities and this wins appreciation and brings about new opportunities. Close relationships continue to be in focus. Emotions run close to the surface. You may also see the culmination or fruits of a personal project at this time. This week is good for foreign affairs and education. Personal relations are satisfying and you have plenty of goodwill and friendships around you. You are likely to get back to fitness routines and diet programs to enhance health and energy.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You are ambitious, authoritative and courageous. This period is excellent for career and business income. Extra care should be exercised when it comes to negotiations and one-on-one communications. Be as non-judgmental as you can with a partner. There may be the need to revisit old issues in a partnership, or there could be some communication problems with a partner. Misunderstandings with your partner now can do some damage if you focus on words said instead of the meanings behind the words. Stick to regular exercise routine and regular pattern of nutritious diet.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) If you need to talk through problems, do your best to be as non-judgmental as possible, and don't over-react to what your partner has to say either. Re-thinking a partnership arrangement is possible now, but you should avoid jumping to any premature decisions. It would be wise

to be especially clear when it comes to communicating with people, take time to re-examine issues rather than communicating about them prematurely. Communicative abilities will largely be applied to professional world ambitions where knowledge and education are pursued in order to enhance career prospects and financial matters.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This week brings entertainment, communication and popularity among people and harmonious relations in personal and professional life. Intimate connections can be especially meaningful. Intensity appeals in your relationships. It's a good time to work out money problems or other issues of sharing with a partner. You may get the backing you need now - financial or emotional. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive pleasure from these activities. More freedom is likely to be experienced in your career. Integrity and honesty will be the keynote.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) People in fine arts, and communication related fields would give a non-traditional blend to their creations and get popularity by the work done. Routine affairs simply don't seem to satisfy. You receive pleasure from anything that expands your horizons, both physically and mentally. People from overseas and foreign climes may particularly appeal now. You tend to be expansive and generous when it comes to love. A love interest who attracts you during this cycle may be somebody who you previously wouldn't consider attractive, or someone whose cultural background is very different from yours.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You would have a strong desire to cooperate and communicate with others. You feel most comfortable spending time with people on a one-to-one level, or with those with whom you share personal matters. Your own thoughts become clearer through dialogue with others. You may be involved in public relations work, counseling, negotiating, or arbitration during this cycle. There is a lot of emphasis on communications with partners and best friends at this time. You can use the power of words to advise others or to make peace with people in your life.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) The planetary configuration indicates authority figures, elders, parents, or influential people in your life who will support you and whose respect you will earn. They are more willing to help you on your road to success. The more willing you are to be in the limelight and take center stage, the more positive the rewards. You need to keep your eyes open for opportunities and family relations. You have a taste for the exotic now that can show up in many areas of your life - who you are attracted to, what you buy, the kind of art or entertainment you enjoy, and so forth. You would be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You are more diplomatic than usual during this transit. Delays and miscommunications are possible. It's a good time for rethinking and revising partnership matters. You are likely to take your hobbies and talents more seriously. This is an excellent week for concentrating on a personal hobby and turning it into a source of income. You accept the individuality of loved ones and that would be helpful to resolve your conflicts and move ahead in harmony. You feel fresh and re-energized. Finding a balance between autonomy and dependence is key for you at this time.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) Negative expression of this energy is the tendency towards ego conflicts concerning jointly held property or money. Conflicts with partners over values or possessions are possible. Occasionally, this transit could bring a crisis or ending of some kind. Something you hear about now might disturb or touch you deeply. You would be more sensitive and dedicated to your personal and professional life. You work hard to meet the goals. This is a good time to build your skills, to get organized, and to attend to your health and wellbeing.

Is sleeping a lot actually bad for health? Sleep scientist explains

We're constantly being reminded by news articles and social media posts that we should be getting more sleep. You probably don't need to hear it again - not sleeping enough is bad for your brain, heart and overall health, not to mention your skin and sex drive.

But what about sleeping "too much"? Recent reports that sleeping more than nine hours could be worse for your health than sleeping too little may have you throwing up your hands in despair.

It can be hard not to feel confused and worried. But how much sleep do we need? And what can sleeping a lot really tell us about our health? Let's unpack the evidence.

Sleep is essential for our health

Along with nutrition and physical activity, sleep is an essential pillar of health.

During sleep, physiological processes occur that allow our bodies to function effectively when we are awake. These include processes involved in muscle recovery, memory consolidation and emotional regulation.

The Sleep Health Foundation - Australia's leading not-for-profit organisation that provides evidence-based information on sleep health - recommends adults get seven to nine hours of sleep per night.

Some people are naturally short sleepers and can function well with less than seven hours.

However, for most of us, sleeping less than seven hours will have negative effects. These may be short term; for example, the day after a poor night's sleep you might have less energy, worse mood, feel more stressed and find it harder to concentrate at work.

In the long term, not getting enough good quality sleep is a major risk factor for health problems. It's linked to a higher risk of developing cardiovascular disease - such as heart attacks and stroke - metabolic disorders, including type 2 diabetes, poor mental health, such as depression and anxiety, cancer and death.

So, it's clear that not getting enough sleep is bad for us. But what about too

much sleep?

Is too much sleep bad?

In a recent study, researchers reviewed the results of 79 other studies that followed people for at least one year and measured how sleep duration impacts the risk of poor health or dying to see if there was an overall trend.

They found people who slept for short durations - less than seven hours a night - had a 14 per cent higher risk of dying in the study period, compared to those who slept between seven and eight hours. This is not surprising given the established health risks of poor sleep.

However, the researchers also found those who slept a lot - which they defined as more than nine hours a night - had a greater risk of dying: 34 per cent higher than people who slept seven to eight hours.

This supports similar research from 2018, which combined results from 74 previous studies that followed the sleep and health of participants across time, ranging from one to 30 years.

It found sleeping more than nine hours was associated with a 14 per cent increased risk of dying in the study period.

Research has also shown sleeping too long (meaning more than required for your age) is linked to health problems such as depression, chronic pain, weight gain and metabolic disorders.

This may sound alarming. But it's crucial to remember these studies have only found a link between sleeping too long and poor health - this doesn't mean sleeping too long is the cause of health problems or death.

So, what's the link?

Multiple factors may influence the relationship between sleeping a lot and having poor health.

It's common for people with chronic health problems to consistently sleep for long periods. Their bodies may need additional rest to support recovery, or they may spend more time in bed due to symptoms or medication side effects.

People with chronic health problems may also not be getting high quality sleep, and may stay in bed for longer to try and get some extra sleep.

Additionally, we know risk factors for poor health, such as smoking and being overweight, are also associated with poor sleep.

This means people may be sleeping more because of existing health problems or lifestyle behaviours, not that sleeping more is causing the poor health. Put simply, sleeping may be a symptom of poor health, not the cause.

What's the ideal amount?

The reasons some people sleep a little and others sleep a lot depend on individual differences - and we don't yet fully understand these.

Our sleep needs can be related to age. Teenagers often want to sleep more and may physically need to, with sleep recommendations for teens being slightly higher than adults at eight to ten hours. Teens may also go to bed and wake up later.

Older adults may want to spend more time in bed. However, unless they have a sleep disorder, the amount they need to sleep will be the same as when they were younger.

But most adults will require seven to nine hours, so this is the healthy window to aim for.

It's not just about how much sleep you get. Good quality sleep and a consistent bed time and wake time are just as important - if not more so - for your overall health.

The bottom line

Given many Australian adults are not receiving the recommended amount of sleep, we should focus on how to make sure we get enough sleep, rather than worrying we are getting too much.

To give yourself the best chance of a good night's sleep, get sunlight and stay active during the day, and try to keep a regular sleep and wake time. In the hour before bed, avoid screens, do something relaxing, and make sure your sleep space is quiet, dark, and comfortable.

If you notice you are regularly sleeping much longer than usual, it could be your body's way of telling you something else is going on. If you're struggling with sleep or are concerned, speak with your GP. You can also explore the resources on the Sleep Health Foundation website. (The Conversation)

"Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace."

—Amelia Earhart

The Shillong Times

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Delayed justice

INDIAN courts have earned notoriety for long delays in the dispensation of justice, whether this be the Supreme Court, the high courts or the lower courts. Cases are dragging for decades without the final verdict emerging. Now, as high as five crore cases are pending in various courts. Of these, some 32 lakh cases are pending for over a decade. There have been no serious efforts on the part of the central government to effect reforms in the judiciary to overcome such painful scenarios. The government, it would appear, is not even serious about filling the existing vacancies of judges. It turns out that several recommendations for judge appointments that were cleared by the Supreme Court have been pending with the government for a long time. In this context, a reminder sent by Chief Justice of the apex court, Justice BR Gavai, the other day to the government stressed that collegiums recommendations must be processed "in their entirety without cherry-picking". This exposed the rift between the government and the judiciary in such appointments.

As was stated in Parliament, two judge-vacancies exist in the Supreme Court, 371 in the high courts and over 5,200 in the district courts. From 2020 till now, 35 judges have been appointed to the Supreme Court and 554 judges to the high courts. The government blames the courts for not forwarding or processing vacancies immediately after each retirement. Courts say the government is delaying their recommendations. Fact is that both sides are not doing their jobs even as millions of cases are clogging the judicial system for want of timely disposal. Justice delayed is Justice denied. It is no secret that extraneous factors delay the selection and appointment of judges. The government has its likes and dislikes; and so do the judges. At both levels, a fair manner of selection based on merit is quite unlikely. State governments are also involved in the selection of judges for each high court, wherein names are forwarded by the high court chief justices to Delhi. Yet, a trust-deficit is evident between the government and the judiciary.

Indian courts have conducted themselves with considerable restraint and wisdom when it comes to handling matters related to the government. Unlike in Pakistan, courts here make an attempt to avoid embarrassing top governmental functionaries in general, an exception being the disqualification of election of Indira Gandhi by the Allahabad high court, leading to her imposition of Emergency. It helped her carry on as prime minister for a while more in the 1970s. Another confrontation was in 2015, when the Supreme Court, in a controversial action, stalled a law that the UPA-II had brought in to appoint a judicial appointments commission to streamline the process of recruitment of judges. The Modi government did not show the courage to take this forward to its logical conclusion. Any democratically elected government worth its salt is duty-bound to reduce the current interminable delay in justice-dispensation. This needless delay hurts one and all.

Letters to the Editor

Climate Change Demands Urgent Attention

Editor,

The editorial "Climate Change Warning" (ST July 26, 2025) made interesting reading. Over and above what the editorial has covered, the causes of climate change in Meghalaya are a mix of global drivers and local stressors, shaped by its unique geography, socio-economic conditions and ecological fragility. The key climate shifts in Meghalaya are that the average annual temperature has increased by 1.2 degree Celsius over the past century. Once predictable monsoons now show irregular patterns, with longest dry spells and intense downpours and increased frequency of flash floods, landslides and heatwaves. The local causes of climate vulnerability are environmental such as deforestation, quarrying, monoculture plantations, forest degradation, declining soil fertility, pest outbreaks and jhum cultivation stress. Further there is water stress as water retention is poor due to the terrain, drying streams and erratic rainfall. Urbanisation has led to unregulated construction, loss of green cover and river pollution. The socio-economic factor includes low household income, limited credit access and poor health infrastructure.

A recent study found 25 out of 39 blocks in Meghalaya fall under high or very high climate vulnerability. The key factors include inadequate Anganwadi centers, low forest resource availability and economic hardship and lack of adaptive capacity. Some notable local impacts: The production of Lakadong turmeric is threat-

ened in Laskein block due to erratic weather; farmers in Mynriang, East Khasi Hills to adapt to changing rainfall and pest pressure have started planting Soh-ter (Watermelon) along with broomsticks. Another notable local impact is water scarcity in Shillong and Tura despite high annual rainfall, due to runoff and poor infrastructure. The climate vulnerability zones in Meghalaya are:

District	Vulnerability level	Key climate stressors	Socio-ecological sensitivities
South West Khasi Hills	Very High	Extreme rainfall events, soil erosion	Jhum pressure, low infrastructure coverage
West Jaintia Hills	High	Crop failure, water stress	Lakadong turmeric threatened, poor credit access
East Garo Hills	High	Landslide risk, heatwaves	Forest degradation, low health infrastructure
Ri Bhoi	Moderate	Urban expansion, ground water runoff	Green cover loss, peripheral vulnerabilities
East Khasi Hills (Shillong)	Moderate-High	Heat stress, flash floods	River pollution, poor water retention, high density
South Garo Hills	High	Erratic rainfall, crop loss	Subsistence farming, lack of adaptive tools

There is therefore a need to draw up a vulnerability map block-wise which should include policy prioritisation, localised adaptation planning, institutional coordination and funding and climate finance. As for policy prioritisation, resources should be targeted to blocks like Laskein, South West Khasi Hills and East Garo Hills. Align social schemes like Anganwadi, healthcare expansion where adaptive capacity is lowest. Use it to justify Mission Lakadong 2.0 – a climate resilience upgrade via agronomic R&D and pest-resistant turmeric varieties.

For localised adaptation planning, develop block-level climate action plans with community participation,

Still in Darkness: The Forgotten Villages Guarding India's Border

By Andrias Talang

In the far eastern stretches of Meghalaya, tucked within the forested hills of East Jaintia Hills district, lie the villages of Hingaria, Hurui, Lahalein, Lailong, and Lejri, collectively known as the Shiliang Wah region. Though these villages form part of India's international border with Bangladesh and serve as the very frontline of national defence, they remain completely neglected when it comes to the most basic necessity of life: electricity.

Since Independence, these villages have never been connected to the power grid. In an age where urban India is celebrating advancements in digital technology, smart cities, and artificial intelligence, the people of Shiliang Wah region continue to live in literal darkness. Their homes are lit by kerosene lamps, their children study by candlelight, and their hopes are dimmed by decades of official neglect. While national schemes boast of near-universal electrification across the country, these remote villages are a painful reminder of the gap between data and ground reality.

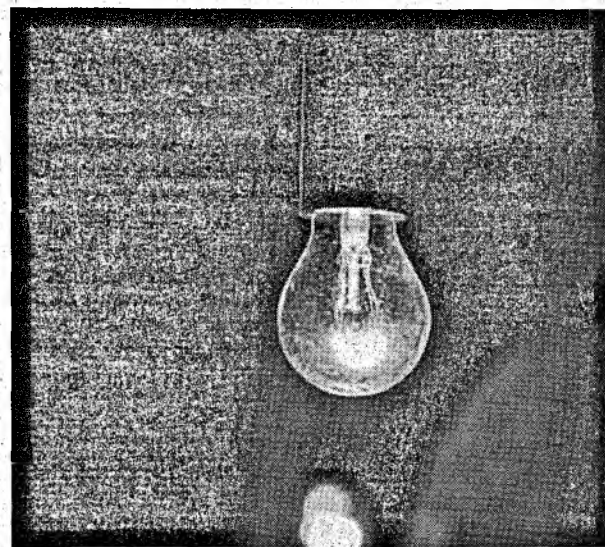
The absence of electricity here is not just an inconvenience; it is a crisis that touches every aspect of life. Children, eager to learn and compete with the rest of the world, find themselves unable to study after sunset. Families have no access to modern communication, and in medical emergencies, they are left helpless. Vaccines cannot be stored, patients cannot be treated in the dark, and travelling to the nearest town becomes a race against time, especially at night. The economy of the region, heavily dependent on agriculture, and areca nut or broomstick plantations, suffers due to the lack of basic infrastructure. Without electricity, villagers are unable to process, store, or add value to their produce. Small industries cannot be established, and employment opportunities remain scarce. What could have been a thriving border economy

remains frozen in time.

But beyond the hardship of daily life, there is a larger, more serious concern that must be acknowledged. These villages lie on the edge of the nation. They are not only the borders of Meghalaya but also the frontline of India's territorial defence. By continuing to live and survive in this challenging terrain, the residents of Hingaria, Hurui, Lahalein, Lailong, and Lejri have played the role of silent sentinels. Their presence is what asserts India's sovereignty in these far-flung parts of the country. In times when borderlands elsewhere

continue to guard the nation by their presence, often reporting suspicious movement and doing their best to resist illegal migration from across the border.

In truth, these villagers have served not only as farmers and workers but also as voluntary watchmen of the nation's frontier. Instead of neglect, their efforts deserve national recognition. If anything, the government should reward them with special consideration for their service—a form of civilian defence that few talk about but which continues, quietly and bravely, every



see declining populations, these villagers have remained steadfast. They have not deserted their land, not despite hardship, but in spite of it.

The situation is even more critical when viewed in light of cross-border challenges. With political instability and frequent clashes in certain parts of Bangladesh, illegal migration into India remains a constant threat. The lack of electrification along this sensitive border only adds to the problem, making it easier for infiltrators to enter under the cover of darkness. And yet, the people of Shiliang Wah region have never turned their backs. Despite being left without basic facilities, they

single day.

Yet, this remarkable resilience has not been met with recognition or support. The government's repeated claims of development and empowerment have not translated into action here. There have been countless memorandums and pleas submitted by the villagers to government departments and elected representatives. Promises have been made during elections and official visits, but year after year, the situation remains unchanged. There are no power lines, no transformers, and no signs of electrification projects underway. The government has failed not only in delivering

services but also in honouring the dignity and contribution of these people.

It is both ironic and tragic that while these villagers protect the country's borders through their very presence, the country has failed to protect their basic rights. The very people who help India secure its frontier remain insecure in their own lives. Border area development programmes exist on paper, but they have never illuminated the homes of the Shiliang Wah region.

The demand is not for luxury, but for justice. Electricity is not a favour, it is a fundamental right, a basic facility that every citizen of the country deserves. If India is serious about inclusive growth, if it truly means to stand by the vision of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas", then it must ensure that no village, especially one at its very edge, is left behind.

Electrifying Hingaria, Hurui, Lahalein, Lailong, and Lejri should be treated not just as a rural development initiative but as a matter of national duty. These villages deserve immediate attention from the state government of Meghalaya and the central government alike. The relevant departments Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited (MeECL), Ministry of Power, Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, and the Border Area Development Programme must work in coordination to ensure that the Shiliang Wah region in East Jaintia Hills is no longer forgotten.

To leave these villages in darkness is not just an administrative failure, it is a betrayal of the people who stand at the frontline of the State and the Nation. Their contribution to India's security and sovereignty must be recognised not with words but with action. The lights that have brightened much of India must now reach the borders where they are needed most.

(The writer is a Law Student, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong)

Can Tribals Only Play Sports?

By Avner Pariat

Meghalaya is currently being courted and celebrated for its sporting prowess. From football heroes like Eugene Lyngdoh to Everest conquering Rifness Warjri, Meghalayans have demonstrated exceptional physical talent. Their achievements are brilliant tests of willpower, discipline and endurance and honestly if I had to do any of these things I would definitely collapse, onto the floor, in a sweaty and dishevelled heap. However, while sports remain an important avenue for youth empowerment, I am of the opinion that the state government must broaden its vision.

Before we proceed further, I wish to digress a bit and talk about a 19th Century British Raj era idea called the "Martial Races" theory. This was a Colonial racial classification system devised by the British to categorize certain ethnic groups as "naturally warlike" and thus more suited for military service and other physical activities. Because of this they began favouring groups they perceived as "loyal," "brave," and "physically robust" – often from mountainous or frontier regions like Nepal and the Punjab. As we can see (even today) this led to widespread stereotyping of these people as "warriors", as being athletic. And it was also true for many tribals across the coun-

ment. Chess clubs, debating clubs, book clubs, astronomy clubs, science labs, quizzing societies are not as prominent because they are not spectacles and no large crowds would probably cheer them on but I would argue they are as important as any football match. There is a real need to create projects and programmes for these within educational institutions and not just host 3 day events which will not lead to widespread penetration and localised adoption.

Again the recent film policy, the numerous concerts and the grassroots music project (i.e. MGMP) are designed to correct this imbalance for those in the Creative field. I think these are a step in the right direction though again there must be more reward incentives for original content here as well. Right now, everyone who is singing at an MGMP mini event is doing covers, which are fine, but perhaps it would be more worthwhile to encourage something new and exciting from the practitioners.

Why does this matter though, you might be asking? Because when a society and/or government repeatedly tells our tribal youth that their primary value lies in physical ability, it limits their self-perception. Many internalize the idea that they

"In a world that is rapidly changing, Meghalaya can't afford to waste its nascent brainpower. What if the next great vaccine comes from a tribal biochemist doing research on herbal remedies? What if the solution to flood-resistant housing is hidden in traditional architecture? We'll never know unless we start nurturing curiosity alongside cricket skills."

try. Khasi labourers were seen as stout, tough and fit for physical labour which is why they were chosen (along with the Nepalis I must add) to be part of the Labour Corp during World War I. This meant they had to dig the trenches, carry the equipment, and perform other forms of menial labour. We remember their names on the plaques of Mothran (French Monument) in Lewduh. Again while the physical traits are commendable in general, this way of viewing us – tribals – has also limited the perception of our potentialities. Viewing the youth of Meghalaya only as "players" and an overemphasis on Sports as community obsession (reflected in government policy) fails to tackle a centuries old idea which might be very demeaning actually.

Again please do not mistake my argument. Sports have always been an integral part of the tribal societies in Meghalaya. Traditional games like archery, wrestling and tug-of-war highlight the common interests of our ancestors. In modern times, football has become almost a cultural phenomenon, with local clubs and tournaments drawing massive crowds. The government has supported this passion through infrastructure, trainings, and funding. However, this focus has led to an unintended consequence: the reinforcement of the colonial-era stereotype that tribal communities are "physically gifted but intellectually lacking." Historically, British administrators and ethnographers often depicted tribals as "noble savages" – strong, artistic, and instinctive but not rational or scholarly. And I fear that we continue to fall for the ploy.

A cursory look at state-sponsored programmes reveals a disproportionate allocation of resources. While Sports (especially football) have been allocated numerous academies, stadiums, and scholarships for athletes, amounting to hundreds of crores, intellectual activities have had very little invest-

cannot excel in "cerebral" fields, leading to underrepresentation in academia, science, and governance.

In a world that is rapidly changing, Meghalaya can't afford to waste its nascent brainpower. What if the next great vaccine comes from a tribal biochemist doing research on herbal remedies? What if the solution to flood-resistant housing is hidden in traditional architecture? We'll never know unless we start nurturing curiosity alongside cricket skills.

So what's the way forward? First, shift the narrative. Celebrate and foreground tribal scientists, writers, and thinkers as loudly as we do football stars. Second, re-balance funding and resources – build more libraries and labs, not just stadiums. Third, policy changes: there should be more scholarships for STEM fields, and cultural programmes that don't treat tribal art as museum pieces but that encourage the evolution of our traditions. Too often right now, traditions have become synonymous with preservation but they need the space and resources to change as well. They are not immutable, they are not set in stone. Every year the Behdeinkhlam festival shows us that we can blend both tradition and aspects of modern life and contemporary issues. I love seeing their creative ingenuity when it comes to the designs of the rots!

Most of all, we need to ask ourselves: Why should any child in Meghalaya grow up thinking their only ticket to a better life is through their feet or fists, football or UFC? The hills of this state have produced warriors, yes, but also writers, thinkers, and yes, dreamers. It's time we honoured that full legacy – not just the part that fits an old colonial script. After all, the future belongs to those who can imagine it, not just those who can run the fastest. Let's make sure our tribal youth know they're meant to do both!

Matrilineal Magic: Why Our Mother's Way Keeps Our Souls Connected

Editor,

As a proud member of the Jaintia community, I stand firm in defending our ancestral matrilineal system against those who would dismantle it under the guise of "progress" or misguided notions of gender equality.

Let me speak from personal experience. I became an orphan at the age of 12, losing my father, and then lost my mother just two years later at 14. In our darkest hour, we weren't abandoned or left to fend for ourselves – our maternal uncles stepped in without hesitation and raised us as their own. This wasn't charity; this was our system working exactly as our ancestors intended. In patrilineal societies, people often say that once men marry, both of their legs are in their wife's family – but this is not our Jaintia way. We who profess Niamtre understand that true strength comes from the maternal bond that transcends marriage, ensuring that no child ever truly becomes an orphan.

Let's be crystal clear: our matrilineal system isn't broken – it's brilliant. When we place our ancestors' bones in the maternal clan's ossuary, we're not just following tradition – we're completing a sacred cycle that has guided souls home for generations. This isn't some arbitrary custom; it's spiritual GPS that ensures our departed find their rightful place among their mother's lineage.

The beauty of our system lies in its perfect balance. Yes, lineage flows through mothers, but men aren't sidelined – they're empowered in their own right. A Jaintia man

leads his maternal clan with honour, wisdom, and responsibility. He's not diminished by belonging to his mother's line; he's strengthened by it. Meanwhile, Jaintia women hold the threads that weave our society together, ensuring continuity and stability.

Consider the practical wisdom: in our matrilineal system, property stays within the family circle. Children inherit from their mother's line, keeping wealth circulating through the clan rather than fragmenting across multiple families. Orphans are automatically cared for by their maternal uncles. Elderly parents are supported by their daughter's family. This isn't bias – it's brilliant social engineering!

Those pushing for patrilineal change are essentially asking us to burn down our ancestral library because they think the lighting is better in someone else's house. They want to sever the sacred bond between our people and our maternal roots, all while claiming it's about equality.

The real equality is in preserving what works. Our matrilineal system has sustained us for centuries precisely because it honours both men and women in their proper roles. It's time to stop apologizing for our heritage and start celebrating the genius of our mothers.

Yours etc.,
Dr Omarlin Kyndiah
Via email

Urgent Need to Address Breaches in Border Security

Editor,

Through the columns of your respected newspaper, I wish to express my concern over a troubling incident involving eight Bangladeshi nationals who were recently apprehended by the GRPF in

Bongaigaon while attempting to board a train to Chennai for work. According to media reports they entered India through the porous Meghalaya-Bangladesh border after allegedly paying Rs 8,500 each to human traffickers.

This episode highlights a serious gap in our border management system. Despite the deployment of security personnel along our international boundaries, such illegal entries remain alarmingly possible. The difficult terrain of the Meghalaya border is well known, but can we continue to use geography as an excuse for recurring infiltration?

Organised trafficking networks exploit these vulnerabilities with disturbing ease. In many cases, they benefit from negligence or lapses in duty by individuals entrusted with border security. Even a momentary failure in vigilance can lead to serious national security implications.

The issue demands more than routine responses. It calls for a strategic overhaul—tightening surveillance, increasing fencing in critical zones, empowering local intelligence networks, and holding accountable those who fail in their duties.

This is not merely about economic migration—it is about the sanctity of our borders and the safety of our people. I urge the authorities concerned to investigate the matter thoroughly and take decisive steps to prevent such breaches in the future.

Yours etc.,
Prashant Goswami
Guwahati

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.

Borders: The Stark Reality

BEYOND the official circles where illegal immigration and how it can be strictly controlled is discussed, life at the borders is a completely different reality. There is interdependence especially among those whose livelihoods depend on commerce. What is available in Bangladesh is what people on the Meghalaya side of the border need. They include fish, dry fish and Chinese made products which are much cheaper than the Indian made ones. In the real world prices matter and for border residents most goods from Bangladesh are cheaper than those transported all the way from Shillong, Tura, Jowai or Nongstoin.

The Indo-Bangladesh border on the Meghalaya side is an open one. In the East Khasi Hills side the fencing that is seen right through the areas of Bholaganj ends before reaching Sohbar. At Dawki right down to Balat the river Umngot is the boundary separating the two countries. Around Ichamati the fencing over rivers had collapsed due to floods. At Ranikor too the borders are not fenced. The same is the case with the Indo-Bangladesh borders in Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills. It's an open secret that there is a lot of unofficial border trade with trucks carrying vegetables, fruits, sugar and other food items from the Indian side regularly crossing the borders over to Bangladesh at night. It is not physically possible to guard every inch of a border that is not fenced off. Interestingly the border haats are all shut since August 2024. Not that they were transacting brisk business in the past. After the fall of the Sheikh Hasina Government in August 2024 the number of refugees and economic migrants from Bangladesh has gone up by leaps and bounds. They come via the open borders in Meghalaya, Assam, Tripura etc. While illegal migration from Bangladesh has always been an issue of great concern in this country, more so after the 2024 coup, India has no data on the exact number of illegal immigrants present in India today. Reports claim that the figure is around the range of 15 million Bangladeshis living in India. This has major economic, social, and security implications for the country, more so for the border states in North east India — Tripura, Meghalaya and Assam.

Scholars studying illegal migration aver that the solution for India lies in a multi-faceted and well-coordinated strategy that fits within the legal framework such as the introduction of a national refugee law. This law must make a distinction between refugees who obtain a residence permit and illegal persons who receive a return decision. Although India has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, it can introduce the definition of the 1951 Refugee Convention in its domestic law, defining a refugee as someone who is being persecuted on account of religion in his country (in this case Bangladesh where Hindus are persecuted). Overall, however, it is important to tighten control over borders. Border fencing and tighter policing at the borders are non-negotiable factors.

The nineteenth century has seen the shift in our culture and the emergence of the Seng Khasi to counter the onslaught of Christianity. Our present attempts are aimed at the revival, reclamation, reconstruction of the same. So we search for the building blocks, two of which are - the religion for religion's sake and the philosophy aspects. Resulting from this, is the division of the society into two major factions mired in orthodoxy, fundamentalism, the things that culture has never been subjected to in the pre-Christian era.

The building blocks - Our ancestral knowledge system lives in an oral tradition, more specifically the healing practices. This has been recorded in the mainstream Khasi literature. As with many others, it was the same with me before I understood the words of our divine healers in their chanting, which at first I couldn't comprehend the meanings of the words. Now this is resolved because it can be simplified. The window to this, is the knowledge and understanding of one word - "Ontology" which in Khasi parlance is known as "Ka Dor nylla jong ka Mariang", including the nature of our existence in the ineffable cosmos. From this alone, we can reconstruct our knowledge. This writer has undergone the same process and here is the core principle:

Our Cosmology is beyond the "U Blei najrong-na tbian". This knowledge emanates from the understanding of the nature of our existence in this cosmos, of which we are only one of the units of the organism, ever active, the knowing-knower, self-sustaining, self-balancing, efficient energy which whether we call it Blei (God), or by other name does not matter. Our ancestors have more meaningful and appropriate names which are commensurate to the above description. It is known as "Ka Hukum" (the Essence and the Law of this Universe/Organism that is involved in every atom of the same; thus governing the cosmos and all existents from within them, by it being the Cosmos itself. This energy is also known as "Ka Bor Maian", meaning the mystical force which cannot be explained in words without one projecting oneself out of it. Thus, non-dualism, a philosophy we inherited, is all embracing by virtue of its universality, and profundity. It made our ancestors secular; another legacy written in the timeless soul. Cycles of moons and stars walked by and disappeared before its eyes; but it never changed.

A Culture in the Wings of the Wind

By Isaid Khongjee

Books, libraries, museums shall eternally look to it for inspiration.

Our religions breathe in the fresh air from this life; this philosophy and disappear like they did a hundred years ago, except in some villages like Nongri and Wakhken (all in the area near Pynursla). That we never had the word "bym ngeit blei" (atheists) in our vocabulary is rooted in this. Poetry and philosophy meet here. Our universe in its physical and spiritual form is one reality, not two. Based on the above, now we can say "there's nothing to be reclaimed; neither have we lost anything; we have changed only the colours on the wheels of time; life, is the same as

from?" From those areas I got these sort of answers. On another occasion I asked an old man this - "phi ong kumno shaphang U Nongthaw?" (what do you think about the creator). He said: "i phi sa nga, nga u ngno?" (you see me, who am I?). There's absolutely no human history in them. Perhaps we can call it a metaphysical history.

The stumbling blocks: In 2003 I was with the late Smitu Kothari. I was then a member of an NGO. He was with a group of students from USA. He asked me for feedback on the learnings from an interaction with Seng Khasi leaders. My contentious views agitated him, making him say - "give one example of Khasi world

a re-examination. We don't know all the cognates, agnates, but their blood flows in our being, keeping us alive. A reality check: our history takes the human being into consideration from the time the seed lands in the womb; while in the above, a young human stands excluded from the purview, taking only intellectual layers of existence into consideration. In the same way, at the rate of the above, the baby would have been an atheist under the modern narrative which is dehumanizing. On the other hand our oral, an all-embracing philosophy doesn't dehumanise the human on grounds of the "Tip" (know); instead it places the human being at par with the gods. If not a degeneration, then what is this?

At the age of ten, while in primary school, in Sohra, I was badly thrashed because I couldn't answer the questions "Uei u Blei?" (Who is god?), "mano ba thaw ia ngi?" (Who created us?). According to us, every human at all stages of life is considered divine, perfect, without an atom of sin, or having wronged the Creator in any way. Like all existents, we come with the knowledge of the whole cosmos, blessed, and sanctified by the same; you may call it god, blei, Allah, Brahman, it makes no difference. No humbug about this. Our wise ones say - "na ka duwan jong ka Hok la biang lut ka hok-ka sot, kyrkhu-kyrdoh, pynsleh-pynknyntang, ka rngiew-ka bshi. Lada duna nangtei, ym pat wan ka longbriew. Kaba sah ia ngi ka dei sa tang ban im palei, im suk-im tngen para briew" meaning- nothing has fallen short from the cause; what's left of us is only to live in peace and contentment with fellow beings. This is the philosophy that emerged from the complex scheme of cosmic things brought down to the simple reality, instead of complicating the simple.

This is the face of ancestral philosophy. Under its ambit, we are "Ki khun Ka Blei/Ka Blai" - the children of the Goddess. Our justice system of "Ka bishar bishar blei" also evolves from the above principle. It's surprising that it's being patronized by Western religions, and by the RSS. Millions of sages, seers among our ancestors walked this land, maybe thousands of years ago, and many are still walking now. So no, nothing has been lost; there's nothing to be reclaimed either. Nothing new can be added to it. This culture is neither here, nor there, nor in the skies but it is within us - we only have to rediscover ourselves.

The window to this, is the knowledge and understanding of one word - "Ontology" which in Khasi parlance is known as "Ka Dor nylla jong ka Mariang", including the nature of our existence in the ineffable cosmos. From this alone, we can reconstruct our knowledge.

from the beginning. Our ancestors have seen this law and applied it in their communication to the higher one. We can call it shamanic, etc. In the previous articles I have said that religions were an improvisation to preserve the life divine.

Our history - We call the past "ka mynnor; ka mynbarim." This history lies in our participation in the cause at the beginning of creation. One elder gave this analogy: "Lada ym don lypa ka Longbriew ha ka U

view." Obligated, I told the story about the evangelist who preached to an old man from Mawmang village. He eloquently lectured about God. The old man, after listening, said "mano ba thaw ia u Blei?" meaning - "who made god?" to which the other said "ym don ba thaw ia u Blei", meaning "no one made god." I told Kothari - "this sort of question, (asked by the man from a village) has no answer, for the question is the answer". On hearing this he stood up saying - "enough

Like all existents, we come with the knowledge of the whole cosmos, blessed, and sanctified by the same; you may call it god, blei, Allah, Brahman, it makes no difference. No humbug about this. Our wise ones say - "na ka duwan jong ka Hok la biang lut ka hok-ka sot, kyrkhu-kyrdoh, pynsleh-pynknyntang, ka rngiew-ka bshi.

Nongthaw-Nongbuh, ym mih briew naei? meaning - if this human being was not involved in the Cause, then what is our origin? This is our cultural history, a history which whether known or unknown makes no difference to life. It's a history that transcends time and space.

Causality - I once asked an old woman from Mawshuit - "phin leit shano Meirad ynda la iap?" (where will you go grandma after you die?). The answer she gave was "u brew wan u nyt-no?" meaning "where does a human come

Khongjee, enough!" He stood up and explained to his team about our knowledge system. At that moment I silently said to myself "this is a wise man from India".

Previous writings about us centre on the "Kamai ia ka Hok; im tip briew-tip Blei-tip Kur tip kha". Weighing the above on the scale of an existentialist philosophy, like ours, one can say that "they are only moral and social values." That as a people, we've failed in living up to them, is a defining testimony. Again - The "tip kha" needs

Delayed CSTO Recommendation of Meghalaya

By Melarbor Lyngdoh Thabab

Constitutional Schedule Tribes Order 1950 is the legal document that specifies which tribes are considered as Scheduled Tribes in different states. The benefit of this recognition is that tribes of other states can purchase land, property, conduct business, attain the same rights, get political representation, reservation in state government jobs and education in those states which recognise them as tribals. The process of inclusion/exclusion from the Schedule Tribe List involves the most important primary recommendation of the state government, followed by the Registrar General of India and the National Commission of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (NCSC&ST).

In the 1976 CSTO Amendment, Meghalaya simply adopted and accepted the notification of 17 (seventeen) tribes which are recognized as tribes from erstwhile Assam without thinking about the negative ramifications such an adoption process would wrought upon the 3 (three) indigenous tribes of the state namely the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo people.

One has to laud the MLA from North Shillong for bringing a motion for amendment on this important subject matter in the 2024 Assembly Summer Session. In my opinion, there should be only three indigenous tribes but an error was made in the adoption process from the Assam ST Order during the 1976 CSTO Amendment whereby the Khasi Jaintia people were wrongly sub-classed into (five) groups namely Pnar, Synteng, Bhoi, War and Lyngngam. These are merely different names of the same people based on their geographical residence. The time is now ripe for such a De-notification because of a dearth of land/property, jobs, education and business even amongst us indigenous tribals. The procrastination for De-notification will aggravate the horrendous situation that we the indigenous tribals are currently enduring. In the absence of the Chief Minister owing to illness, the Tourism Minister spoke on his behalf in his assembly reply, that a departmental committee would be set up to study in detail all the facts; involve all the stakeholders and finally send its recommendations to the competent authority within (3) three months' time. It has now been 11 months and the names of the committee members have not been notified as yet, let alone submitting a report. Will the North Shillong MLA who introduced this special motion be included as a member, is a thought worth pondering.

It is a notable fact that the Biatei are recognized tribes in five states namely Assam, Tripura, Manipur, Mizoram and Meghalaya. Meghalaya must exempt them since they are already recognized in four other states where their population is more prominent. Questions

linger whether they are truly indigenous to the Jaintia Hills. The 3 indigenous tribals compete amongst themselves for property, education and job seats, businesses which are meagre and to have these other additional tribes in our ST list serves as an unwanted exacerbation to our misery. What I am pleading is logical and fair; that is the other additional indigenous tribes, should only be recognized as tribals of the state of their origin.

The 2-judge bench of the Supreme Court of India in its judgement on February 7, 2024 had stated that tribes of one state should not be recognized as tribes in another state unless notified as tribals. The logic behind this ruling that I had deduced is that benefits of the indigenous tribals of recipient state are watered down and subjected to unfair competition when these other tribes emanate from other states acquire the same benefits as those indigenous tribes of that recipient state. The Khasi, Jaintia and Garo are not recognized as tribes in all those states where these tribes originating from other states are recognized as tribes in Meghalaya.

This is not a tit for tat situation even if those states recognize us as tribals. It is a fundamental matter of the inalienable right that we have not to recognize them for our protection. With due respect to them, it is important and just that they be recognized as tribals in their own state(s) from which they emanate. It is an urgent matter of protecting our own 3 indigenous tribes from being eroded by tribals of other states in terms of acquisition of our land/property since land/property is life and identity, conduct businesses and tax breaks which affects our survival in livelihood, attains the same rights like political representation, reservation in state government jobs and education et. al. which all consequently increase their standard of living thus resulting in an increase in their tribal population thereby affecting the demography of the three indigenous tribes which affects our existence and identity.

All these concerns are not figments of our imagination but signifies a clear and visible danger hence the urgency to act which we urge upon the Cabinet to not delay and withhold the inevitable but to (a) Notify the committee members within 1 (one) month before the start of the 2025 Autumn session, (b) Within a deadline of 3 (three) from the date of notification of the committee members; to make public in the House and send its recommendations to the Registrar General of India and NCSC&ST, (c) The Cabinet must follow up on the amended De-notification of all the tribes except only the rightful Khasi, Jaintia and Garo indigenous Scheduled Tribes of our state for an approved order.

Letters to the Editor

Please show concern for others too

Editor, Through your esteemed daily, I would like to bring certain concerns to the kind notice of all. I am a resident of ward 3 in Lower Lachumiere, Shillong. For years, I proudly considered our locality a peaceful heaven, ideal for students and working individuals with family, who cherish a quiet, residential atmosphere. However, recently, one of my neighbour's houses has been sublet to other people, probably to operate a guest house for tourist which has been the source of disturbance and disrupting my family's daily life.

While I fully understand and support Meghalaya's thriving tourism industry, the unchecked use of residential properties for loud, overnight parties poses a serious challenge to the residents like us. Some guests, both local and from outside the state, host noisy gatherings, often with blaring music and singing that continues late into the night. With homes spaced barely 5-6 meters apart, these events rob neighbours of their privacy, violate their peace, and deprive them of sleep essential for work and study. Besides this, the growing

trend of some local tenants using DJ sound systems to celebrate late into the night, often until 2 or 3 am, completely ignoring the presence of neighbours is another serious concern. The addition of vehicles plying thorough Hopkinson Road, especially at night, with extraordinarily loud sound systems and modified engines only compounds the problem, making week-ends more dreaded than anticipated. It seems that people like us, who make a conscious effort not to inconvenience others, are slowly being sidelined, viewed as 'fossils' in an increasingly inconsiderate society.

I fear that the individuals to whom this message is most pertinent, will never read it, as it is typically only those with a sense of social responsibility and moral awareness who go through articles in the editorial page. Therefore, through this letter, I would like to appeal to the home-owners, guests, and especially to the respected Rangbah Shnong of Lachumiere Dorbar to take necessary measures to uphold the rights of residents, who simply seek a peaceful existence.

Let us respect our fellow residents and allow everyone to live without compromising the dignity and peace of others.

Yours etc.,
D. Bokolial
Shillong-1

OBC candidates of Meghalaya deprived of opportunities under Central Government quota

Editor, Apropos of the letter, "Non-issuance of OBC Certificates in Meghalaya," published recently in your esteemed daily, the issue is of grave concern as it directly affects the educational and employment prospects of many deserving candidates belonging to the OBC category in the state. Due to the non-issuance of OBC certificates in Meghalaya, a large number of eligible candidates are being deprived of their rightful opportunities under Central Government schemes and reservations. They are unable to apply for various entrance examinations conducted by Central Government agencies where the OBC quota is applicable. This not only limits their chances of admission to reputed institutions but also denies them equal competition with candidates from other states who are availing themselves of the OBC reservation benefits. Moreover, the OBC

quota in Central Government jobs allocated to Meghalaya remains grossly underutilized, as eligible candidates cannot produce the mandatory OBC certificate. This defeats the very purpose of reservation, which is meant to uplift socially and educationally backward communities.

It is, therefore, earnestly urged that the Government take immediate steps to resolve this issue and ensure that OBC certificates are issued without unnecessary delays. This will enable eligible candidates to fully avail themselves of opportunities in Central Government educational institutions, jobs, and entrance examinations, without affecting the existing reservation quotas of the state, thereby safeguarding their rightful share in the OBC quota.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj Chhetry
Tura

A memorial for Captain Clifford

Editor, The first Mahavir Chakra from Meghalaya, the highest gallantry award holder of this state till now, Captain Clifford Nongrum holds a very special place in the hearts of the residents of this state. The crowd which awaited the ar-

rival of his last remains along the roadside from the helipad to his residence, was phenomenal. It is high time that the Meghalaya Government builds a special memorial in his honour at some prominent location in the State.

Yours etc.,
Subhasis Chakrawarty
Via email

District Adminsitration's order flouted

Editor, I would again like to draw attention of the district administration regarding continued disregard of the ban imposed on the movement of heavy motor vehicles along Mc.Cabe Road, Shillong issued by the Deputy Commissioner (East Khasi Hills) and subsequent directive from the Superintendent of Police. Despite clear prohibitions and warnings of levying penalties, heavily-loaded vehicles continue to ply this road daily between 9 PM and 7 AM - flouting the order with impunity. This blatant violation not only undermines the authority of the administration but also compromises public safety and infrastructure. What is the point of issuing such orders if they are not enforced effectively?

I had previously brought

this issue to the notice of the district administration through your esteemed daily (DC's Order flagrantly violated, ST dated 8th July, 2025) but the ground reality remains unchanged. I once again urge the concerned authorities to take meaningful steps to enforce the same for the sake of public safety.

Yours etc.,
D. Bhattacharjee,
Shillong-1

Unlocking NE's Export Potential through the India-UK FTA

Editor, Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, I wish to express my views on the recently concluded India-UK Free Trade Agreement (FTA), a landmark development that holds far-reaching implications for India's economy and global trade positioning.

After 15 rounds of rigorous discussions over several years, India and the United Kingdom have finally signed a Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) in 2025. This agreement eliminates tariffs on 99% of Indian goods exported to the UK, offering Indian exporters an

unprecedented opportunity to access one of the world's most advanced and mature markets. This FTA is not merely a trade deal — it is a powerful tool of economic diplomacy. With exports to the UK currently valued at \$55 billion, projections suggest this figure could surpass \$120 billion by 2030, potentially allowing India to overtake China as one of the UK's largest trading partners.

Importantly, this development will benefit various Indian states, including those in the Northeast such as Meghalaya. Meghalaya has immense potential in sectors like organic farming, horticulture (pineapples, oranges, bay leaves), traditional handloom and handicrafts, silk production, and eco-tourism. With tariffs reduced or eliminated, products like Lakadong turmeric, wild honey, handwoven textiles, and indigenous spices can find promising markets in the UK. The agreement could also boost investments in infrastructure and skill development, provided the state actively participates in the national export ecosystem. Additionally, better market access may encourage youth entrepreneurship and women-led enterprises, especially in rural areas.

Beyond trade, the FTA envisions broader cooperation under the India-UK Vision

2035, including joint efforts in defence, education, clean energy, and technology. This not only strengthens diplomatic ties but also opens doors for states like Meghalaya to engage in educational exchanges, research collaborations, and perhaps attract sustainable tourism and climate-related investments.

A key challenge now lies in ensuring that Indian exports — including those from remote regions — adhere to global quality standards. The "Made in India" brand, to be truly respected, must reflect reliability, ethical production, and environmental sustainability.

In conclusion, the India-UK FTA is a bold step toward reshaping India's global trade narrative. For a state like Meghalaya, it is an opportunity to carve a niche in the international market by combining traditional knowledge with modern enterprise. I urge both policymakers and local stakeholders to seize this moment and align state-level strategies with this national milestone.

Yours etc.,
S Bhardwaj
Shillong-3

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"Flowers grow out of dark moments."

— Corita Kent

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Nuns and politics

THE arrest of two nuns of the Syro-Malabar Church from a railway station in BJP-ruled Chhattisgarh at the behest of Bajrang Dal activists has created a sensation. A ticket examiner chanced upon the nuns and a few assistants accompanying them, and raised the suspicion that the two missionaries were attempting religious conversions. The church says the women were only assistants to the nuns and no attempt at conversion was made. It's no secret that the minorities feel unsafe under BJP rule, which seemingly acts with a pro-Hindu mindset. Naturally, the nuns' arrest was seen as another 'provocation'. It has become a practice for governments today to arrest people without first — and prima facie — establishing the likelihood of a law-violation. An allegation by itself does not warrant an arrest. Such arrests happen more under the BJP dispensation, mainly when it comes to situations of religious engagements.

Religious freedom is enshrined in the Constitution. India is a secular nation, unlike Pakistan that is an Islamic republic. The Constitution here guarantees this via Articles 25-28, which give citizens the right to practise, profess and propagate their religion. What is unacceptable is conversion by force. India, has for long been a mosaic of religions. Buddhism thrived here before Hinduism became the main religion. Buddhism today has large numbers of followers in other Asian countries, while Hinduism is a dominant religion in India and Nepal and has pockets of presence elsewhere, like Mauritius, Fiji etc. Admittedly, India is home to Hindus, a stated reason why the pro-RSS outfits are keen on preserving it and averting any challenge to its continued dominance here. Protection and preservation should however not be done in a ham-handed manner. In this context, it would sound curious that the BJP is making concerted efforts to woo Christians in states like Kerala, where they form nearly one-fifth of the population. With large sections of Hindus in the state being under the sway of Communism and Muslims forming a quarter of the population, the BJP is keen on getting Christian support there, as in Goa or Tamil Nadu or the North-East for that matter. Remarkably, while there have been large-scale religious conversions in recent decades in the eastern sector, the tribals there benefited majorly by way of their emancipation. They were brought into the national mainstream with proper education by able help from the missionaries.

Reports like the arrest of nuns in Chhattisgarh by a BJP government on somewhat flimsy grounds do not jell well with the party's outreach to Christians in several states. In Jammu and Kashmir, too, despite the reservations the party's leadership has against Muslims, the BJP cohabited in power with the pro-Muslim PDP. Overall, the dichotomy is all too pronounced. For the BJP, this is like a circus without a ring. To win power, ideology can wait. On ground, offensives would continue. A problem, however, is that in the long run, the people would see through the games of those who don a double face.

Letters to the Editor

How to Lose 4000 MT Tonnes of Coal in 10 Storms

Editor,

I was reading your newspaper and it suddenly got me thinking about important things.....like coal and rain. I saw that our Honourable Minister has put forward a theory about the 4,000 metric tonnes of missing coal. He thinks it might have been "washed away". This is a profound scientific breakthrough, and my brain is struggling to keep up.

Firstly, has the rain in Meghalaya recently evolved? I left a bucket out in my garden last week and it just got wet. It didn't wash away..... the bucket, I mean. If rain can wash away 4000 metric tonnes of what is essentially a very hard, black rock, then why is anything in the state still here? What is even more baffling is that this wasn't just any common rainstorm, it was one of them "smart" rains. At one depot, it washed away 1,839.03 metric tonnes but politely left 2.5 metric tonnes behind, perhaps as a sample for the authorities. At another, it whisked away 2,121.62 metric tonnes but left a mere 8 metric tonnes.

How do we arm ourselves against this kind of rain? As a teacher I am wondering if we should now chain our students to their desks during monsoon season.....it is all very worrying!

And where did the coal go, has anyone checked the Bay of Bengal for a new, large, black, lumpy island

that wasn't there before. If we can't find it, does that mean the coal has dissolved?

Just as my mind was reeling from this, the Minister said something else very clever. He said that people here only do illegal things (like, hypothetically, digging and transporting coal) for "survival". This is confusing, because he had just blamed the weather. So, the official story is that the coal was taken by an act of God, but there's a backup story in case the rain has an alibi.

For the sake of logic, let us explore this "survival" theory. For someone to need 4,000 metric tonnes of coal to survive, what exactly was their predicament?

1. Were they planning to eat it.....that seems like an awful lot of roughage to me.

or

2. Were they just very, very cold, colder than anyone has ever been in the history of being cold. It is truly an alarming level of survival!

So which is it then? Was the coal washed away, or was it taken by someone for 'survival', it can't be both. Unless the rain itself was doing it to survive. Which opens up a whole new can of worms that I am certainly not qualified to investigate.

It's all very puzzling, and it really makes you appreciate our leaders for having minds that can come up with possibilities that the rest of us could never dream of.

Ultimately, the most baffling part isn't the disappearing coal, it is the assumption that we would believe it.....

Yours etc.,

Ellerine Diengdoh,

Via email

Legal Relocation or Quiet Eviction: Is the 2014 Act Under Threat?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

There has been a lot of debate and reaction regarding the relocation of hawkers from the footpaths of Khyndailand to the 1st floor of the MUDA Parking Lot. While the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 does not prevent relocation, it has clearly laid down certain conditions under which one can implement such actions. The Second Schedule, subsection 2b, clearly mentions that certain principles must govern the relocation of hawkers from their previous place of business. There are 8 of these, and one is very relevant in this case. This is principle number (iii) which reads: affected vendors shall be relocated so as to improve their livelihoods and standards of living or at least to restore them, in real terms, to pre-eviction levels. Simply put, this principle states that relocating hawkers is unacceptable if the new location will negatively affect their ability to earn a living. If they cannot experience an increase in their income, it must be in real terms (income which is adjusted for inflation to get the real value of money) not lower from what they could earn in the previous location. The question therefore is whether the relocation taking place in Khyndailand will lead to a fall in income of the hawkers or will it improve it in the long term.

The press release of the Urban Affairs Department dated July 24, 2025, reveals the answer to the first question. Paragraph 5 has this to say about the issue: In addition, the Urban Affairs Department is providing a relocation allowance to vendors holding a valid CoV. This support includes a one-time payment of Rs 10,000 and a monthly allowance of Rs 2,000 for five months. So, there is a clear admission by the government that the relocation will at least temporarily lead to a fall in income for the hawkers. Therefore, they are providing financial support to facilitate the relocation. This includes a one-time payment of Rs 10,000 and a monthly allowance of Rs 2,000 for five months, which brings the total cost altogether to Rs 81,40,000, if we take the

government figure that they found 407 vendors eligible for a Certificate of Vending (CoV). The cost accrued to the government will rise if more hawkers are eligible for the Certificate.

Meghalaya and Greater Shillong Progressive Hawkers and Street Vendors Association (MGSPHSA), which has been at the forefront of demanding the implementation of the Central Law, has accused that the list omits many genuine hawkers. If this is true, this will majorly violate the judgment that a High Court has already passed on the eviction and relocation of hawkers. This is the May 2025 Malkit Singh vs. State of UT Chandigarh and others judgment. While stating that eviction is illegal under the 2014 Act, the High Court of Punjab and Haryana pointed out that "the benefits which it meant to give to the genuine street vendors is also being misused by a certain set of persons, and that even the shopkeepers themselves set up hawkers' stalls in front of their shops selling their own items". So, non-genuine hawkers are appropriating the rights of the genuine hawkers. The High Court deemed this a serious breach of the law, stating that "such misuse of law deserves to be dealt with an iron hand and a will to execute the provisions of law with integrity and dutifully." If one were to believe the claims made by MGSPHSA, this is exactly what has taken place.

Genuine hawkers have been deprived of their rights, and this has been at the behest of the Urban Affairs Department, which is leading the process. During the next hearing of the case in the Meghalaya High Court, it will be important for the Court to ask the MUDA to submit the rationale for approving and ignoring the applications for Certificates of Vending (CoV). If there has been some lapse, it must be determined whether this was intention or the result of a process implemented hurriedly. In case it is intentional, the Court must order an investigation to find the culprits behind it because this is clearly a case of corruption. If we want to uphold the

rule of law, we must identify and punish the people who took part in this illegal activity. This is a very serious issue, and I hope the Court will look into this and get to the bottom of the truth.

Coming back to the compensation that the hawkers are going to get which is Rs 20,000 per hawker in total, it is also important the Court ask the Government about how they arrived at these figures. Did the Urban Affairs Department do a survey of the hawkers to assess the turnover and the income earned by them? How was the survey designed? Was it a sample survey or were all the hawkers surveyed? If it was a sample survey, what was the sample size and how did the study account for the different businesses (e.g., kwait, clothes, shoes, electronics, food, etc.) practiced by the hawkers? What was the average income that the survey revealed and was this figure the basis for the Rs 20,000 per hawker arrived at by the government? It could very well be that the Rs 20,000 is actually higher than the actual financial compensation that is needed. In that case, the government is being over-generous and committing to a loss of precious financial resources, which for a financially strapped state like Meghalaya is a big problem. But in case the compensation grossly underestimates the loss that the hawkers are going to experience by shifting to a new location, it violates the 2014 Act and therefore is illegal. The Court can then exercise its mandate and stop an illegality from taking place.

One thing that has to be remembered is that the Rs 20,000 per hawker is meant to supplement what the hawkers would earn in the new location. So, in an ideal situation, if the new site is better or similar to the old site, the hawkers will earn an extra Rs 20,000, which is pure profit for them. The government would then be viewed favourably by the hawkers, who would become its staunchest supporters in the future. But if the financial support works out to be purely compensation for losing income at the new

site, as long as the hawkers are getting it, their earnings will not suffer. But when they stop getting it, i.e., after 5 months, the hawkers will start experiencing a decline in income; it will again violate the 2014 Act. So, the Court must ask the Government about how it arrived at the Rs 20,000 per hawker and the market projections it must have made to prove that the hawkers will not suffer a loss of income during the five months period and after it. In case there is a decline in income, is the government planning to restart the financial support or are they going to allow the hawkers to return to the old site where they can regain their lost earnings? If they do neither of the two, this is just a tactic to push the hawkers into a situation where desperation makes them abandon their business, i.e., eviction in the long run. This also goes against the 2014 Act.

It took almost a decade and lots of struggles to get the Government of Meghalaya to repeal the illegal state Act and adopt the Central Act. But, despite assuring the Court that it will implement the Act in its totality there are attempts being made to circumvent the Act, at least that's the allegation of MGSPHSA and my opinion unless the relocation does not adhere to the principles underlined in the Act. It was the Supreme Court that directed the Union Government to make the law on hawkers, and today the case is back in the courts, albeit the Meghalaya High Court. So, it will be very interesting to see how the Court handles it because in the end we will have to defer to it. Courts are the guardians of the Constitution and the law in the country and our state. And I hope they will eventually make everyone follow the 2014 Act, whether it's the hawkers or the Government. That will be justice, and considering all the corruption and legal violations taking place every day in our society, we urgently need hope that, in the end, the Constitution will prevail and the law will be upheld.

(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)

none of the readers have either of the above traits.

Yours etc.,

Toki Blah,

Via email

Rejoinder from Local Fund Audit

Editor,

The letter, "Unjustified harassment appearing in the editorial column of Shillong Times dated 16th July, 2025, is unacceptable and the allegations made therein that the Directorate of Local Fund Audit (DLFA) takes 10 years to identify errors in pay fixation of College teachers is untrue and baseless.

All cases of fixation of pay and reporting of DCRG of College teachers which were received in the DLFA up to the Financial Year 2021-22 from the Directorate of Higher & Technical Education (DHTE) have been disposed off and settled.

However, during the course of fixation of pay, certain over-fixation by concerned colleges were detected and the DLFA has advised the DHTE to ask the concerned teachers to refund the amount which has been overdrawn. As per prevailing Rules, if a Government employee has received over-payment due to errors in fixation of pay, etc., the amount will have to be recovered from the employee. Hence, DLFA is acting in compliance with the Rules and procedures of the State Government and not at its own behest.

Further, the Education Department had enhanced the rate of DCRG from Rs

7 lakh to Rs 10 lakh for Deficit College teachers in 2023 which had been communicated to DLFA vide letter No. EDN 22/2007/258 dated 16-16-2023. From this enhancement of DCRG, a total of 200 cases which had already been settled earlier were again re-submitted to DLFA for reporting the balance amount of DCRG.

As of March 31, 2024, there were 14 cases pending with DLFA for fixation of pay. During 2024-25, 200 cases were received by DLFA which also included the cases which were earlier settled but had to be reviewed again due to the enhancement of the rate of DCRG. The Directorate completed settlement of a total of 158 cases in the year 2024-25. Further, during the period from 1st March till July 23, 2025, another 58 cases were settled and reported back to DHTE. The current pending cases lying with DLFA as of today stands at 15 which are expected to be settled by the end of July 2025.

In spite of the challenges faced, this Directorate remains committed to the expeditious completion of the task of fixation of pay and DCRG reporting of all retired lecturers of Deficit and Ad-hoc colleges in the State and refutes the views of the person who wrote this particular letter.

Yours etc.,

Smti A.M Tariang
Director of Local Fund Audit,
Government of Meghalaya

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

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

An Island in Your Head..!

It's only 6 in the morning and already Manhattan is in a frenzy. Cars honking, buses groaning, and joggers zooming past like they've got to beat the stock market before breakfast. The air smells of ambition mixed with bagels and burnt coffee. I do my morning walk beside the East River, dodging determined runners and overly enthusiastic dogs. I wonder whether this city ever sleeps, or if sleep here is just a coffee break between meetings.

There's something relentless about New York — and no, that's not a complaint. It's just how the city is wired. The skyscrapers aren't the only things trying to reach the heavens; the people are too. Climbing ladders, chasing dreams, updating LinkedIn.

And then I see it.

A pedestrian bridge. Not grand like the Brooklyn Bridge that graces postcards, nor flashy like Williamsburg's with its art deco flair. Just an old, weathered crossing, quietly offering another way. No signage, no marketing. It wasn't shouting, just inviting. And sometimes, those are the most meaningful calls — the ones that don't scream.

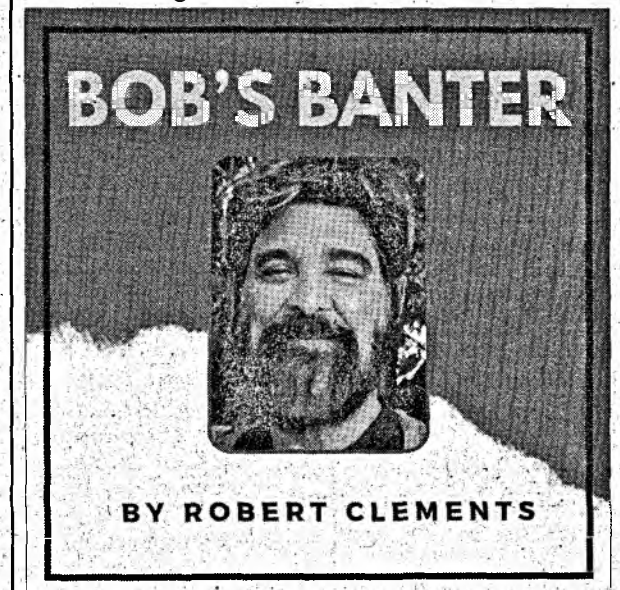
Curiosity nudges me. I start walking. It creaks

to have it all together. But inside each of us is a Randall's Island. A quiet place, a still place. A space where ducks don't care if you missed a deadline and the river doesn't mind your unpaid bills. It's calm. It's clear. It's where peace lives.

But — and there's always a "but" — you've got to get there. And here's the tricky part: the bridge to that peace comes with a hump. And that hump? That's your worry. Your anxiety. That unresolved conversation from last week. That WhatsApp group that gives more stress than updates. That voice in your head that says, "You're not enough," every time you almost believe that you are.

Humps don't vanish with positive thinking or reading a quote on Instagram with a sunset background. You have to walk over them. One careful step at a time.

Sometimes it means letting go of things. Sometimes it means forgiving people who don't deserve it — for your sake. Sometimes it means putting your phone in a drawer and pretending it's 1992. And sometimes it's just about choosing to cross — even if it creaks and groans beneath your weight. But cross it, and what awaits on the other side is not utopia — it's perspective. The chaos doesn't vanish. The



under my steps, the boards weathered by time and shoe soles from every corner of the world. Halfway through, there's a hump. Not the kind you hop over and forget, but one that makes you question your knees, your age, and the number of vanilla ice-creams you had last night.

But I make it over. And then, like someone hit mute on the chaos behind me — silence.

I'm on Randall's Island. And suddenly the same river that just moments ago echoed with sirens and subway rumblings now carries only the gentle lap of water against stone. Ducks glide past like they're late for nothing. A bird tweets — not on Twitter, mind you, but in real life. That natural, melodic kind of tweeting we've almost forgotten about.

I look around. The air is still. My shoulders, which had been stationed somewhere near my ears thanks to the stress of surviving the city, drop into a natural place. I breathe. No, not the short, shallow gulps we've turned into a lifestyle, but a real breath. A breath my lungs have been waiting for. And in that moment, a thought ambushes me: "Why can't life be like this?"

And then I realise — it can. You see, this island wasn't tucked away in the Himalayas, or hidden in the Pacific Ocean with coconuts and hammocks. It was right here. A short bridge. A small hump. A little willingness to cross over.

Isn't that how it is with our minds too?

Most of us live on the Manhattan side of our brains. Traffic. Tension. The to-do list that grows faster than our bank balance. Texts we forgot to reply to. Calls we don't want to take. And that one email which begins, "As per my last message..." — which, if you didn't already know, is corporate for, "Why are you still so dense?"

We're always on. Always performing. Always pretending to have it all together while secretly Googling how

cars don't stop. The city doesn't suddenly go silent. You just stop letting it live rent-free in your head.

You begin to realise that life isn't always about getting ahead. Sometimes it's about getting away — even if it's just across an old pedestrian bridge.

So, dear reader, find your bridge. It may not be a physical one, but it exists. For some, it's early morning prayer. For others, it's a jog in the park. For some it's writing, for others it's reading. And for a lucky few, it's simply switching off the world and watching ducks do duck things.

Walk your hump.

It may wobble under you. Your knees may complain. Your phone may beep angrily, asking where you are. Ignore them.

Keep walking. Because beyond that hump is peace — not the peace of perfect circumstances, but the peace of inner stillness.

And that's the kind of peace that powers you through Manhattan traffic and Monday morning meetings. Because sometimes, peace isn't found in those flashy cars, nor in the speed they can drive. It isn't in exotic getaways, expensive spas, or apps that promise mindfulness in five minutes. Sometimes what we need is an old pedestrian bridge in our minds, one that helps us cross over to a quieter self.

And as for the WhatsApp message my cousin sent back in 2018 — the one that still makes me roll my eyes — I haven't replied.

Some humps, my friend, need a bit more huffing and puffing before they're crossed...!

(Robert Clements is a newspaper columnist whose column "Bob's Banter" appears in over 60 newspapers across the world. He sometimes finds ducks far more therapeutic than deadlines. You can request for his daily column on whatsapp by messaging him on bobsbanter@gmail.com)

"Simplicity is prerequisite for reliability."

— Edsger Dijkstra

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Minister's Claptrap

THE glib explanation given by Revenue Minister, Kyrmen Shylla on the disappearance of 4000 metric tonnes of coal from a particular depot which is roughly about 40 truck-loads of coal as being washed away by heavy rains, apart from being the biggest yarn should actually call for a deeper investigation. The Minister's statement has gone viral and he has become the butt of a country-wide joke. That the Minister also comes from a family engaged in coal mining puts him in a spot when such questions are asked. The irony of it all is that coal is regularly transported despite the NGT ban in 2014. Anyone who travels to Jaintia Hills sees the coal carrying trucks covered with tarpaulin and there are policemen along the Jowai bypass right through to the East Jaintia Hills coal mines who are posted along the roads to collect money from these coal carrying trucks. It's not as if the police officials posted along these roads care about being reported. For them it's par for the course.

Hence the media knows the modus operandi but continues to ask these questions perhaps to seek accountability from the MDA Government. Daily these coal trucks transport coal via Assam to different destinations. Coal is still transported to Bangladesh despite the chaos in that country. So too is limestone from the War-Jaintia areas and boulders and sand from Pynursla and adjoining areas. Meghalaya is set for a massive environmental disaster but since the mine and quarry owners are what are termed as "high level" people who pull the strings in the Government it is a futile exercise for the media too to labour on the same issues. News about the massive quarrying near Mawkasiani in the New Shillong Township area is another story of impending devastation. The company that did the quarrying is connected to a minister in the MDA Government. Similar quarrying was done in the Upper Umkhen area in Mawlyngad some years ago thereby leaving the Umkhen nearly dry. Quarrying is carrying on unabated and those supposed custodians of our land and forests namely the Autonomous District Councils and the Rangbah Shnong of those areas are in cahoots with the quarrying corporates. This is Meghalaya's eternal consternation – that those vested with the authority to guard the environment from imminent disaster are the very ones engaged in mining and quarrying activities.

In the coal disappearance saga, the ministers who should have been questioned are the two Deputy CMs – one in charge of Home (Police) District Council Affairs and the other the Deputy CM in charge of Commerce & Industries Department and the Transport Department amongst others. Transportation of coal could not have happened without the knowledge of the Transport Minister. Kyrmen Shylla is in charge of Revenue and Disaster Management. Hence his statement amounts to a disaster of sorts where the rains have washed away thousands of tons of coal. But can he get away with the glib explanation? Who will hold him accountable for the absurd statement?

DNA of Democracy: Faith Betrayed!

By KN Kumar

In global governance, democracy is a concept that takes centre stage, universally regarded as the best model. It is viewed as the natural outcome of national development, closely tied to freedom, justice, human welfare, and progress. International organizations promote it, countries strive for it (or claim to), and its absence is frequently blamed for many of the world's issues. The common belief is that solving democracy's flaws requires more democracy. But what if this near-religious faith in the current democratic system blinds us to its limitations and, surprisingly, blocks the very progress we usually want? This is a question worth examining openly. Just a quick note: I will approach this topic as objectively as possible. This discussion is not a quiet endorsement of autocracy or a critique of discredited ideologies. Dictatorships, whether overt or subtle, continue to undermine human dignity, freedom, and sustainable well-being. I believe that the gap between democracy's lofty promises and its often chaotic, inefficient, and unfair implementation is significant, and our hesitation to face this truth stops us from developing governance models that truly work.

The Narrative vs. Ground-Level Reality

Democracy's strength mainly depends on its narrative—the compelling story of "rule by the people." However, for many citizens, this story remains abstract and not a lived reality. The complex processes of checks and balances, uninformed public debate, and unaccountable representation often make it seem distant and unclear. Consider voter turnout: even in well-established democracies, participation rates can be surprisingly low (e.g., around 50-60%), indicating a sense of alienation or disillusionment among voters. Ironically, this commitment to voting is more substantial in developing countries and neo-democracies, where people still believe this model works. Even in countries where voting is compulsory (like Australia), citizen engagement still falls short.

My premise is that the 'democratic' label conceals vastly different realities. Countries may hold regular elections, which earns them a democratic label. At the same time, essential freedoms often remain limited (as seen in Hungary or the Philippines), or significant power resides with unelected bodies and

influential elites operating behind the scenes. The narrative reassures citizens that they are in control, even when powerful corporations or entrenched political dynasties usually shape policy. This gap between the empowering story and the often-disempowering reality fosters cynicism among many of us, who are concerned about how our country functions. Some may not care because they feel rooted in their own struggles or have given up. Their world feels 'normal' to them; they see corruption as a way of life and accept violence as 'natural' during elections. They recognize that equality is essentially a myth in a diverse country like ours. So, most of us are resigned, settled, and go about our lives without questioning the system that governs us—precisely what I want to challenge.

The Cracks in Democracy's Pillars: Imperfect Institutions

The institutional framework designed to turn popular will into effective governance—including the legislature, executive, and judiciary—is often plagued by dysfunction and, importantly, corruption. The Legislature: Envisioned as the people's assembly, legislatures often become battlegrounds for partisan conflict, leading to gridlocks that block necessary electoral, judicial, environmental, or tax reforms. Short-term electoral gains usually outweigh long-term national interests.

The Executive: Responsible for enforcing laws and running the state, the executive can easily fall prey to pressures and temptations of various kinds. Bureaucratic inefficiency and 'red tape' can obstruct service delivery, causing frustration among citizens and leaving basic needs unmet, especially in states with limited administrative capacity. Corruption scandals, in which public funds are misappropriated or officials plunder state assets, are frequently reported. It is a worldwide issue—betrayal of public trust is 'normal'.

The Judicial system: Even the supposed ultimate guarantor of rights and the rule of law sometimes falters. Crippling backlogs are common; cases can drag on for decades, and the costly judicial system makes justice effectively out of reach for ordinary citizens. Access is often unequal, favouring

those who can afford lengthy, legal battles. Controversies over judicial appointment processes raise serious questions.

When these core institutions are compromised or fail to meet public expectations, the democratic promise feels hollow. They do not serve as effective channels for turning popular needs into tangible improvements in human welfare.

Flawed Elections and a Compromised Electorate

The electoral process, often considered the cornerstone of democracy, has its own flaws that raise questions about its ability to produce effective governance reliably. In many democracies, high campaign costs create an uneven playing field, favouring wealthy candidates or those backed by financial interests. Opaque political financing laws make it challenging to track who funds campaigns and potentially influences election outcomes. The digital era has weaponized both information and disinformation. Skilled campaigns on social media can manipulate public opinion, deepen divisions, and sway elections through targeted lies and emotionally charged propaganda. How can citizens make informed decisions when the information environment is intentionally polluted?

Populism and Identity Politics: Increasingly, electoral success relies less on thoughtful policy debates and more on unscrupulous leaders who exploit societal divisions—ethnic, religious, or economic. I am not explicitly referring to Meghalaya here; across our country, I see the same divisive and polemical rhetoric being spread. Therefore, no one is immune to populist messages that often oversimplify complex issues and scapegoat linguistic or religious minorities.

Criminalization of Politics: A significant and growing number of Members of Parliament (MPs) (43% of the elected MPs) and Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) have serious criminal cases pending against them, including charges related to heinous crimes like murder, kidnapping, and crimes against women. Reports by organizations such as the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) consistently highlight this trend.

The Transactional Electoral process: Perhaps the most sensitive point is the behaviour of the electorate itself. While celebrating voter choice, we must honestly face the reality that in many states of India (with some notable exceptions, such as Goa), voting decisions are not always based on careful consideration of long-term policy implications. Vote-buying, whether through direct cash payments or subtly disguised pre-election handouts and subsidies, remains a persistent issue. Clientelism, where votes are exchanged for specific favours or patronage, entrenches inequality. Identity politics often outweighs performance assessment. When a significant portion of the electorate can be swayed by immediate, usually unsustainable, inducements or identity-based appeals rather than competence and integrity, the claim that elections reflect the "enlightened will of the people" becomes questionable. Does the election process we have chosen (the first-past-the-post system) reliably select leaders best equipped to handle complex challenges and promote genuine human welfare? My experience tells me: an unequivocal NO.

Beyond Blind Faith

The convergence of these issues—a narrative gap, institutional decay, and flawed electoral mechanisms—suggests that our nearly unquestioning faith in democracy may be misplaced. We meticulously follow procedural rituals—holding elections and counting votes—but often fail to evaluate whether the outcomes truly serve the people critically. This focus on process over substance allows mediocrity, inefficiency, and even corruption to endure under the legitimizing banner of democracy. Recognizing these deep-rooted problems isn't about despair or embracing authoritarian alternatives, which invariably lead to worse outcomes. It's about intellectual honesty and a pragmatic desire for governance that truly benefits human betterment. The path forward requires moving beyond simplistic labels and dogma. I will write a series of articles to challenge some of the illusions of democracy that, willy-nilly, have become ingrained in our DNA. All of these are known, but none of these are questioned. Blind faith, of any kind, is a problem for mankind.

The writer is a former member of the IAS

Government spending, people, and responsibility

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

The development of Meghalaya depends on the interplay of state government spending, role and mindset of the people, and most importantly a sense of responsibility of all stakeholders. The interplay is however disjointed, distorted and in most cases completely missing. This explains the current socio-economic status of Meghalaya especially in the areas of education and healthcare. Unless this chronic ailment is addressed, no amount of money and/or social intervention will bring any tangible and inclusive outcomes. Failure to address the issue will only result in an ever increasing inequality between the rich and poor. Ultimately this will result in a society which is insecure and unsafe (and maybe, even an uprising; a recent example—Arab Spring [Meghalaya Spring?]).

The myth

Pictures and video clips of dilapidated schools, poor quality of mid-day meals, sub-standard road and bridges construction, low quality government procurements such as furniture, etc have been doing the rounds on social media. Most of the comments point to 'this is how government spending works and shall continue to do.' The myth that is blindly believed by all is that 'if it is a government spending then it is bound to be dilapidated, poor quality, sub-standard, etc'.

This myth has to be shattered if at all Meghalaya is to recover and tread on a path to progress. No private party has the capacity to invest as much as the government. There will always be an unfair comparison of the spending capacity of the state government as against the private parties. For instance, recently Meghalaya CM. Conrad Sangma highlighted that his government has spent Rs. 3000 crores in the past few years on education, sports, and entrepreneurship. This is just a small indicator of the propensity of the state government to spend. But, what is actually required is proper spending. It is to be realized that since the government spends so much, hence and in truth the quality of construction/procurement should also be top-notch and far better than the private sector. The only factor is that the same kind of discipline and strictness as seen in private spending is also required in government spending. This is the only aspect that is required to be fulfilled for progress to happen in the public sector.

Red buses – a failed project

A morning school hours experiment at Nongthymmai (Jingkiang Junction) – for every three public vehicles (mainly taxis) that passes by, there are seven private vehicles. The red buses project under the banner of Shillong Public Transport Service (SPTS) was supposed to be a game changer for public transportation. After all, the hallmark of a robust public transportation service is not one that depends on small vehicles but one that is driven by bigger modes such as buses. The red buses were inaugurated with much fanfare but alas, it has come to nothing. A number of such buses are lying unused in Laitkor, Mawpat, Mawkyroh-Umsing, etc. All of them are dilapidated and worth as scrap only. The few which are still running are in a bad shape with no signs of proper maintenance. The red buses are a perfect example of a failed government spending. The state government could have taken more proactive steps to keep the project running. The lack of will power to adequately monitor its performance resulted in its downfall. In Meghalaya, a lot of government spending can be witnessed but with no mechanism to monitor the people who are responsible for operations. One can only

hope that the STEMS buses will not see the same fate.

People

The perspective of people towards government assets is so wrong. There is no sense of care, attachment, and loyalty. One can easily observe and conclude as to how we as people treat government property. The same care and attachment that we give to our private computers or mobile phones or furniture or vehicle or buses, etc is missing when it comes to public assets/properties. This tells a lot about the psyche of the Meghalayan societies. There is a tendency to treat government assets as being free, and hence, they can be used in any way one wishes without an iota of care and loyalty. A scratch happens on a government vehicle and we are indifferent, but, when the same happens to our private vehicles, the heartache and pain will give sleepless nights. There is little realization that any government spending is meant as a means of livelihood for the people and to be nurtured and passed on for generations (take public transportation as an example). Unless the perspective changes the people are partners in crime in the shabby and shady government spending.

Corruption

In 1985, the then Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi said that 'of every rupee that is spent on poverty alleviation and social welfare, only 15 paise reaches the targeted beneficiary'. In the context of development, this explains as to why economic inequality has always been on the rise. Corruption is an ailment that impacts upon the plates of the poor as it deprives the stakeholders of employment opportunities, well-being, growth, and self esteem. Take for instance a developmental project of Rs. 10 lakh meant for rural areas. If only less than half of that amount is actually invested on the ground, it implies a lesser number of beneficiaries engaged in the project which in turn results in lesser people with purchasing power which then impacts upon the demand on the local economy and ultimately on business and entrepreneurship (not to mention the poor quality of construction). It is a must that the exact intended government spending should actually reach the grassroots. Thus, discrepancies and backwardness in Meghalaya is directly related to the issue of corruption.

Utopian political thoughts

The inherent goals of politics is the creation of a city-state for achieving outcomes of virtue and well-being and on these pillars attain economic growth, development, social peace and security, equal opportunities, etc. Virtues and values such as honesty, fairness, justice, equality, and equity, ethics, etc., take centre stage in all actions and interventions of the government. But today, these are just utopian political thoughts. If one is to talk about such aspects in a political platform or any forum, he/she will most definitely be mocked and even mercilessly trolled on social media. The voters have lost their souls. The inherent nature of politics is dead!

In the end, the people should not refrain from their responsibility to call out the government of the day in scenarios of poor governance. But, this is a bit of a misnomer as the civil society in Meghalaya is benign and docile when it comes to questioning matters of poor governance. Well, if better days are to be expected then this has to change and everyone will have to play their small/big parts.

(The writer teaches at NEHU; Email – blyngdoh@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

A breather for pedestrians in Police Bazar

Editor,

Through the columns of your esteemed daily, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude and happiness to the Government of Meghalaya, District administration, Police & Shillong Municipal Board (SMB) for their commendable work in creating a safe and accessible walking space in Khyndailad. It brings immense relief and joy to be able to walk freely without the fear of theft, concern for my children's safety, or the worry of being hit by passing vehicles. This thoughtful initiative has greatly improved the quality of life for pedestrians and families alike. I sincerely thank the SMB for this commendable step towards ensuring public safety and promoting a more walkable city.

However, I would also like to draw the attention of the concerned authorities to the pressing issues faced in other parts of Shillong, especially Laitumkrah and Dhankheti. In Dhankheti, almost all footpaths have been encroached upon. New stalls and theas appear daily, leaving hardly any space for pedestrians. From Laitumkrah Police Point to the Fire Brigade junction, footpaths

have practically disappeared, and hawkers have taken over at least 5 to 6 feet of the motorable road. This severely obstructs vehicular movement and poses a significant safety risk.

Laitumkrah houses many of the city's schools and colleges. Every day, parents with school bags on their backs and children in hand are forced to walk on roads jam-packed with cars and two-wheelers, with little to no footpath available. The fear of an accident is constant and very real. If we are to promote 'Walk Shillong' as envisioned by many citizens, then where is the space for us and our children to walk safely?

Another critical area is the entrance to Nazareth Hospital. Stalls have been set up right on the road, customers are sitting on a mura and having tea right on the road next to a passing car, making it nearly impossible for two cars to pass side by side. Yesterday around 3 PM, I witnessed an ambulance struggling to enter the hospital due to traffic congestion. The situation was made worse by a newly installed shed at the hospital gate, which delayed the ambulance—precious time lost for someone in need. This area has become extremely risky, and immediate intervention is needed.

I would also like to high-

light a concern that recently came to light through several interviews circulating on social media. Local shopkeepers at Laitumkrah Market have expressed deep frustration over the declining state of their businesses. According to them, one major reason is the growing number of hawkers and vendors occupying the footpaths right outside their shops.

While many customers now prefer buying from these street-side stalls due to convenience and lower prices, the registered shopkeepers continue to bear the burden of paying rent, taxes, and electricity bills, with fewer customers walking into their stores. This creates an unfair business environment and threatens the sustainability of small, legitimate businesses that have been part of the market for decades.

The concern is not just about competition—it's also about the unchecked spread of informal vending, which negatively impacts pedestrian safety and market discipline. Many of these vendors operate without proper licenses or regulation, yet occupy the public walking space meant for safe movement.

I sincerely request the concerned authorities to take urgent steps to address these issues and ensure that the safety and mobility of

pedestrians and emergency services are not compromised. Let Khyndailad be the beginning—not the exception—of a truly walkable and safe Shillong.

Yours etc.,
P Majaw,
Shillong-1

One Lane, One Rule: Stay in Line

Editor,

One regularly witnesses traffic at a standstill on the narrow Shillong roads. Stranded vehicles wait patiently, obeying traffic rules, when suddenly a group of two-wheelers begin forcing their way through the gaps on either side, riding dangerously close to the center line, often moving into the lane of oncoming vehicles. This all-too-familiar scene is not just a small annoyance. It is a growing problem that worsens traffic jams, puts lives at risk, and shows how weak traffic discipline has become in our city.

In busy areas like Police Bazar, Bara Bazar, near Don Bosco, Rhino Point, Riblong Point, Dhankheti, and other places where roads are already narrow and traffic is heavy this behaviour has become common and irksome. Two-wheelers use the edges of the road, sometimes even going the wrong way, to pass stationary vehicles. While some may see this as

a harmless shortcut, it causes serious harm. This reckless riding takes up space needed by vehicles coming from the opposite direction. Cars, taxis, and buses must slow down or stop completely to avoid crashing, creating traffic blocks where there should not be any.

This thoughtless rush, meant to avoid delays, actually causes more delays. Instead of helping traffic move, it disrupts the flow—especially at sharp turns and crossings where drivers cannot see an approaching two-wheeler properly. What one rider gains in seconds, hundreds of commuters lose in long waits. The result? Worse traffic, growing frustration, and a higher chance of accidents.

This is not just about inconvenience. It is about safety and survival. Riding on the wrong side is not a shortcut; it is a danger to one's life. One sudden stop, one wrong move, and someone could die. Pedestrians, schoolchildren, older people—they are all at greater risk because of this reckless behaviour. And yet, many riders act as if only they matter. This is not freedom—it is selfishness. And it is harming our city's ability to move safely.

Traffic police officers stand for hours under the hot sun or heavy rain, guiding vehicles with patience and care. They handle tough situations with few people

and limited tools. They are not missing—they are overworked. Blaming them is not fair, and it does not help. The real problem is not poor enforcement—it is poor public awareness. Too many two-wheeler riders think rules do not apply to them.

Shillong deserves better. We are a city under pressure from more vehicles, growing crowds, and overloaded roads. The least we can ask for is basic traffic order. Simple solutions—clear lane markings, designated two-wheeler lanes, consistent patrolling, and public awareness campaigns—can go a long way in restoring safety and flow.

This is not about blaming two-wheelers. It is about fairness. It is about safety. It is about making sure one person's hurry does not hurt everyone else.

Let us not let personal impatience ruin the lives of many. It is time for the authorities to act quickly and for citizens to demand change. Smoother, safer, and more predictable traffic is not a privilege. It is a right. And it starts with respect for lanes, for laws, and for each other.

Yours etc.,
Dr Omarlin Kyndiah,
Via email

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