"Life is really simple, but we insist on making it complicated."

— Confucius

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United opposition

SUCCESS is when adversity turns into an advantage. Consider how the splintered Opposition is uniting at the national level following surprise outcomes in the April-May assembly polls in five states. Those in the Opposition who were bent on undercutting unity and charting an independent course are now a chastened lot. When the INDIA bloc sent a letter to the Chief Justice of India this week, appealing to the judiciary's conscience regarding the BJP's attempt to steamroll them through the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in West Bengal, its signatories included the AAP and the DMK – two parties that had stayed away from the opposition meeting in New Delhi on June 8. Some 24 parties signed the letter, reflecting the collective will of the entire Opposition in this country.

This unity, after years of mutual wrangling, is made possible by the disastrous defeat of the Trinamool Congress in Bengal, the DMK in Tamil Nadu and the AAP in Delhi. Better sense now prevails among the leaders of these parties. While the DMK was a part of the INDIA bloc and stood solidly with the Congress at the national level, it had avoided attending the June 8 meeting of the bloc. MK Stalin was piqued with Congress over its association with the new political power in Tamil Nadu, the TVK led by Chief Minister Joseph Vijay. However, the DMK has realized it has no option but to continue with the INDIA bloc, as the party is ideologically poles apart from the BJP. For Kejriwal, the loss of AAP's home turf Delhi to the BJP was a huge disaster. Yet, the AAP was in no mood to join hands with the Congress. However, it notices that the national political scenario has seen a significant transformation after the five-state assembly polls. The Congress emerged stronger with the electoral win in Kerala – the third state in the South it now governs. The slogan of a Congress-Mukht Bharat is a far cry some 12 years after Prime Minister Narendra Modi raised it at the height of an electoral win for the BJP in 2014. The likes of Mamata Banerjee, who had refused to break bread with Rahul Gandhi, now crawled her way to Delhi to add punch to the INDIA bloc she sought to undermine in the past.

Here now is a rare political configuration. The entire opposition is in a mood to take on the ruling BJP at the Centre and in states in a spirit of newfound unity. This had not been the case all through the last 12 years, when the BJP and the prime minister relished the mutual recriminations in the rival political camp. Situations conspired to bring the Opposition together and give democracy a new strength. The huge electoral defeats, followed by the string of defections to the BJP, sent out the right signals to the regional satraps. The resultant opposition unity will pose a stronger challenge to the government in the Monsoon session of Parliament.

Geopolitics amidst a changing world order

By Toki Blah

Today the term " Geopolitics " is often bandied around as if everyone knows what it means and how it impinges on nations. Let me be candid, even at the risk of being called ill informed, but the fact remains that most of us do not understand the term. I for one, did have a vague notion of what the term stood for but I needed to visit Wikipedia to really understand it.

The idea behind this write-up is to share this understanding with a wider audience, as the writer believes that geopolitical issues are a reality we will increasingly encounter over time. It will not only shape the contours of our lives but it certainly will impact on the life of generations to come. So, what exactly do we mean by Geopolitics? Simply put "Geopolitics" is a study of how Geography (terrain, location, borders, natural resources and climate) often determines a country's political relations with others. Geopolitics shapes and influences the foreign policy, international relations and consequently the power struggle between nations. Geopolitics has certainly manipulated India's relations with its immediate neighbours and will continue to do so into the foreseeable future. In short geopolitics simply magnifies the silhouette where Geography and Political Power merge and the subsequent manifestations from such mergers. This is important to understand

Let us try to cite examples from the past and from current events as to how Power and Geography met and the changes that emerged from such an encounter. World War 2 ended in 1945. This termination of hostilities found the world divided into two blocks or groups. On one hand it found Western Liberal Democracy led by the US having an eyeball -to- eyeball confrontation with the USSR and its allies. This led to the formation of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The battlefield where both parties anticipated meeting in combat was the flat plains of Europe. Ruling out the use of nuclear weapons and by studying the terrain and lay of the land , both sides surprisingly came to the same conclusion. The only way to fight was through the speedy movement of tanks and mechanized infantry amply supported by ground attack aircraft and helicopters. Geography here dictated the methodology of a future war.

Today we find the same strategy being applied in the Middle East. The US despite its mighty and overbearing military power; technological superiority and state of the art weaponry found itself forced into a corner begging for a ceasefire, simply because It never bothered to study the lay of the land before attacking Iran. Iran though militarily weaker than its rival, quickly recognised the strategic value of the Strait of Hormuz, a trump card it held over Trump! Iran made maximum use of a strategic geographical asset it had, a choke point for oil and gas tankers. It simply blocked the strait. This simple act of closing the oil flow to a energy hungry world forced its opponent, a Super Power, to call for a ceasefire and from there to the negotiating table. The outcome from available sources indicate that these talks are dominated by Iranian National interests. Geopolitics at its best.

The incident above and its fallout—the humbling of a powerful bully by a smaller less developed victim—is definitely not lost on the rest of the World. Every country recognizes that the right of unhindered movement in internationally recognized sealanes is the key , if not the most important key, towards globalization of trade and commerce. The growing economy of the whole world depends of this uninterrupted maritime movement. The takeaway from the Strait of Hormuz incident is the realization that growth of Global Economy depends on the freedom of passage through several strategic straits, which act as chokepoints for shipping routes, energy transport, and naval security. It was equally obvious that such choke points either pass through a country or is close to territory of a country who will not hesitate to replicate the Iranian Hormuz experiment, if that country's core national interests are threatened. Iran has just proved that control of such strategic maritime bottlenecks can throw the whole World into a tizzy while also bringing your enemy to its knees. Question that the World community must answer is, Can International Rule of Law, if it still exists after Trump, allow similar incidents in the future?

This brings us to the most crucial question of all. Do similar Geopolitical choke points exist that are either hazardous or beneficial to India? This question immediately brings a disturbing image of the Siliguri Corridor or the so called Chicken's Neck ,that crucial 22 km passageway that links the North East of India to the rest of the country. To make things more difficult for India, this narrow bottle neck has China to its North and Bangladesh to its South. Both countries that are inimical to our nation. Not so long ago the then Chief Adviser of the Interim Govt of Bangladesh, Muhammed Yunus had made no bones in stating the need to bring in India's NE (app 262,184 square kilometers) within the sphere of control of Bangladesh. Yunus is by no means a stupid man. He is a Nobel Laureatte and he, among others must be concerned about Global warming and the consequences it will have on his country. Global Warming will cause the Artic and Antarctic ice to melt; sea levels to raise and cause lowlying costal regions to be submerged. It is calculated that if the sea levels were to rise by a mere 1½ meters , 17% of Bangladesh will be inundated, displacing not less than 20 million of its citizens. Question of interest is where will these displaced people go? So putting 2 and 2 together it is not difficult to understand Yunus's interest in India's NE with its sparse man to land ratio. It is hoped that our policy makers, legislators and Governments are aware of this danger and its migratory potential that could change the whole demographic and geopolitical status of North East India

Not all choke points however are adversarial to India's national interest. South East of the Indian Peninsular, sandwiched between the Northern tip of Indonesia and Malasia's Southern most point, lies the Strait of Malacca through which approximately 94,000 vessels transit annually, carrying roughly 25–30% of global seaborne trade. This makes it the busiest maritime chokepoint in the world by tonnage with main users being China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and ASEAN nations (including Thailand and the Philippines). Now just 74 odd km away from the Northen entrance of the strait sits the Great Nicobar island, an island belonging to India on which India has built and created INS Baaz a naval and air base. Nowhere is it claimed that India owns the Malacca Straits , but the simple fact that India has such a massive naval and air power presence just 74 km away , is enough for the world to recognize as to who has control over the Northern entrance of the straits. This control projects the power that India has over the maritime traffic that pass through the Malacca Straits and both friends as well as adversaries would do well to take note of this fact. By controlling a chokepoint in the Indo-Pacific, India also gains leverage in broader geopolitical conflicts (e.g., if pressure is exerted in the Himalayas, India can respond at sea).

In conclusion, one must admit three factors currently occupy the minds of most nations in the Indo-Pacific region. (1) Fear of Chinese expansionism (2) the undependantly of fickle US defence assurances (3) Emergence of India as a super power within the Indo Pacific region. (1) and (2) are apprehensions, that a changing World order can bring. Everyone knows that on their own it would be difficult if not impossible to stand up against such challenges. Coming together as a collective united force however is a different story. Against such a security background it would make complete sense for the ASEAN members to revisit and reassess the group's Fundamental Principles and Objectives.

A re-evaluation of the Strait's strategic value will not harm anyone. Instead it can help in redesigning ASEAN's security structure. The Straits lie in India's back yard i.e The Bay of Bengal, while the Andaman and Nicobar islands can act as an unsinkable aircraft carrier, guarding the Northen end of the Straits. An ASEAN membership for India and a security alliance between Malasia, Indonesia, Singapore and India to safeguard their own national interests through control of both the entry and exit points of the Straits will make any misadventure into the SE Asia region, by any power intoxicated country , a risk too perilous to undertake. And that is exactly what we want!

The Silence of the Lungs

By Ellerine Diengdoh

Disclaimer: This op-ed has been reviewed by a team of experts who have spent the last decade confirming that 'grey' is, in fact, a colour. They are currently monitoring the situation by standing very far away, probably in Switzerland, looking through binoculars that have been wiped clean of the truth. If you find the satire in this piece too dark, remember that it is still thirty shades lighter than the average Tuesday morning in Byrnihat.

For most of human history, air has always been the polite bit of nothing that existed between your face and whatever it is you wanted to look at.Air never got in the way, and air has always been invisible, like common sense.

However, in our hills, the " Scotland of the East", in a town called Byrnihat, air has undergone a personality change. It has decided that it no longer wants to be anonymous, and insists on being felt, so it has started behaving like a physical thing one must shove aside just to get somewhere.

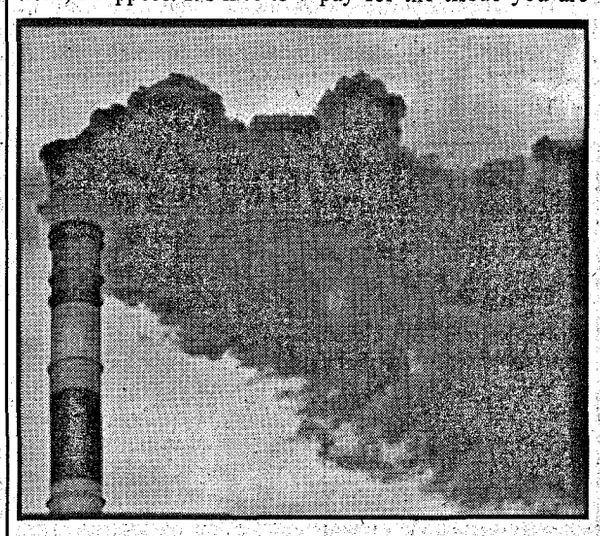
We have been informed that Byrnihat is currently the most polluted place in India, which is not exactly the sort of record anyone wants to break, but still, congratulations, I suppose. It's nice to be first at something, even if that something is an entire town choking to death.

My recent journey through Byrnihat was a revelation, and I half expected scientific field of "looking at things with your eyes" and seeing what others have seen two decades ago. Yet, despite this discovery, nothing has changed, because people argue that we need these grey-air-makers for something called "The Economy".

Now let me explain to you what an economy is from the perspective of an English teacher. The economy is a magical invisible ghost that lives in banks and gets angry if we don't destroy a forest and a river every twenty minutes.

The problem with feeding this invisible ghost is that it leaves the rest of us with a visible problem....a thick, grey paste that coats everything from the trees to the inside of your uncle's throat and yours too if you are not careful.

If you only have half a brain...or perhaps just the one hemisphere that isn't currently clogged with industrial soot...you have to wonder, what's the use of a strong economy if your skin is covered in industrial boils? Who is going to pay for the doctors? Do you think the men who own these smoke-fountains are going to reach into their silk pockets and foot the bill for your oxygen tank? No. They won't even pay for the tissue you are presently using to cough up a piece of their factory. They've built an entire system where the profit goes to them, and the cancer goes to you.



"What you see however is mostly smoke, tons and tons of ghastly smoke that is being pumped into the sky, presumably because factory owners think that the sky is a giant community bin that never gets full, but the sky is full, it is now overflowing with Byrnihat's industrial vomit. Since the sky is now enveloped in this strange, dark ominous cloud, the people living below have had to adopt a strange new diet."

soot-covered Oliver Twist to materialise on the sidewalk gasping for air. So, why has Byrnihat turned into this? Experts will tell you that it is because of something called "Industry." Industry is when humans take a perfectly nice bit of nature and turn it into a place that looks like something straight out of a Dickensian hellscape.

Now, there are factories in Byrnihat, that are making things like iron, cement and smoke. What you see however is mostly smoke, tons and tons of ghastly smoke that is being pumped into the sky, presumably because factory owners think that the sky is a giant community bin that never gets full, but the sky is full, it is now overflowing with Byrnihat's industrial vomit. Since the sky is now enveloped in this strange, dark ominous cloud, the people living below have had to adopt a strange new diet. For those living in Byrnihat, they aren't just breathing, they are basically eating a building one molecule at a time. It is, I must say, a painfully slow way to consume a massive office block, which is much less delicious than a KitKat, or even the paper a KitKat comes in.

Our officials have noticed this, by the way, and tried to fix it by "monitoring" the situation. "Monitoring" for those who don't know, is a clever term for watching something get worse while holding a file and nodding seriously. After years of intense watching, the officials have recently noticed that the air is grey, which is a massive breakthrough in the

In the olden days, people in Meghalaya lived in harmony with nature. Now, they live in harmony with industrial plants. It is definitely less poetic, and it comes with added perks like your laundry coming off the line looking like it's been used to clean the exhaust pipe of a very old, very sick truck.

Now this leads us to a bleak question about where we are all heading. In the future, we will look back at Byrnihat and wonder why we let an entire town turn into a giant, grey ashtray, or we may not, because we will be too busy being dead to care.

While Christians believe you couldn't take your money with you to the afterlife, in Byrnihat, you can at least take a significant portion of a steel plant with you in your windpipe, and that somehow is very reassuring.

In short, Byrnihat stands as a monument to human progress. We took something beautiful and made it the sootiest, smoggiest version of itself, thereby proving that if humans put their minds and several hundred poorly regulated factories to it, we could ruin absolutely anything.....

Inspired by

https://youtu.be/JKCxiBghzwI?si = GBI6-PgnoJij71KPR

https://theshillongtimes.com/2026/06/30/ viral- report-on-byrnihat-ethanol-plant- pollution-faces-govt-denial/

https://www.google.com/amp/s/frontline.thehindu.com/photo-essay / byrnihat-industrial- pollution-public- health-crisis/article70493712.ece/amp/

Letters to the Editor

Women Cricketers Deserve Justice

Editor,

The Meghalaya Cricket Association (MCA) President's move to dismiss and impose lifetime bans on the Head Coach and Manager is nothing but a baby step towards justice. His refusal to pursue action against former office-bearers on the ground that they no longer hold office is untenable and demoralizing. This stance effectively shields former officials who allegedly ignored serious harassment complaints from our women cricketers, in blatant disregard of mandatory legal requirements. The MCA should have, in parallel, filed a formal complaint with the competent authority to initiate proceedings under the BNS, 2023, against all individuals whose conduct prima facie indicate commission of cognizable offences or abetment. If the MCA fails to act, the MSCW should intervene and recommend criminal prosecution.

Suspensions, dismissals, or lifetime bans cannot substitute criminal liability where serious cognizable offences appear to have been committed. The safety and dignity of women athletes demand far more than symbolic administrative measures like ban or suspension. The criminal justice system must be activated to independently assess culpability so that no guilty person is spared. It would be nothing short of a grave sin if we fail to guarantee justice to our young athletes.

Yours etc.,
NK Kehar,
Shillong-3

Politics of Perpetual Suspects

Editor

The proposal to introduce a Non-Tribal Employee's Service Licence raises a simple but fundamental question: What problem is it intended to solve?

Non-tribal traders, employees, business owners and establishments in Meghalaya are hardly strangers to regulation. They are already required to comply with an extensive framework of legal and statutory requirements—trade licences, labour clearances, professional tax registration, Aadhaar, PAN, voter identification, and numerous other obligations depending on the nature of their work. If all these mechanisms already establish identity, legality and accountability, what administrative gap remains that only another licence can fill?

One cannot help but wonder whether, at this rate, even a DNA sequence might someday be demanded to prove one's legitimacy.

The issue, however, extends beyond one proposed licence. It reflects a deeper and older pattern in our politics. For decades, non-tribals—an ever-diminishing minority in the State—have too often served as convenient political targets whenever familiar identity politics needed to be revived. Electoral arithmetic has repeatedly demonstrated that standing up against a vulnerable minority can be more politically rewarding than standing up for better governance.

That is why this proposal appears less like an administrative reform and more like another chapter in a well-rehearsed political script.

Unfortunately, this mindset is no longer confined to electoral politics. It has gradually seeped into institutions that were created to foster unity rather than reinforce social distinctions. Increasingly, organisations whose very purpose is to bring citizens together appear comfortable organising activities along lines of identity.

A recent example is the decision to organise a National Level Tribal Scout/ Guide/Rover/Ranger Meet at the Meghalaya Bharat Scouts and Guides State Headquarters, Pine Mount Ridge, Shillong, from 25th to 29th June 2026. The question is not whether tribal youth deserve encouragement—they certainly do. The question is whether creating separate identity-based platforms serves the very ideals upon which the scouting movement was founded.

Scouting was conceived as a movement where the uniform erased differences of caste, tribe, religion and region. It sought to build character, leadership and friendship by bringing young people together under a common flag, teaching them that citizenship transcends identity. Its enduring motto is not separation, but shared service.

The same principle applies to sports. A playing field is perhaps one of the purest arenas of national integration, where merit, teamwork and discipline matter far more than one's community. If these institutions already provide inclusive platforms where every participant competes as an equal, what compelling purpose is served by organising separate events exclusively on the basis of tribal identity? True inclusion is achieved by ensuring equal access to common institutions, not by creating parallel spaces defined by identity.

When institutions begin equating separation with inclusion, they risk sending an unintended message: that citizens are first members of separate communities and only afterwards members of a shared society. Politics then merely harvests the divisions that institutions have inadvertently helped to cultivate.

It is therefore unsurprising that governments often struggle to confront aggressive identity mobilisation. What were once whispered prejudices have gradually evolved into loud and respectable political slogans. Each new concession to identity-based politics encourages the next demand, and each new demand further normalises discrimination disguised as administrative necessity.

Meghalaya offers the world one of humanity's most remarkable engineering marvels—the Living Root Bridges. They are not constructed in haste. They require patience, cooperation and vision, taking decades to mature while growing stronger with each passing year. They connect villages across rivers not by cutting down nature, but by guiding it towards unity.

Our politics could learn something from these bridges.

The challenge before Meghalaya is not to build ever more bureaucratic barriers between its people, but to cultivate the patience and wisdom to grow bridges of trust. Future generations will not judge us by how many licences we created to separate communities, but by whether we had the courage to build institutions that united them as equal citizens.

Yours etc.,
Narottam Subedi
Shillong - 2

CPR Training a Life Saver

Editor,

The recent initiative of the Office of the District Medical & Health Officer, East Khasi Hills, in imparting training on Cardio-pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR), Basic First Aid and emergency response skills to traffic personnel, Home Guards, teachers and students in Shillong deserves wholehearted appreciation. Such programmes are timely, practical and have the potential to save countless lives. I sincerely hope that similar training initiatives will also be extended to Tura and other parts of Garo Hills.

The region frequently witnesses medical emergencies arising from road accidents, heart attacks and suspected stroke cases, where the first few minutes are often crucial in determining whether a patient survives or suffers permanent disability. While CPR is primarily administered during cardiac arrest, public awareness campaigns should also educate people about recognising the initial warning signs of a stroke.

The need for such programmes is becoming increasingly urgent. India records around 1.25 million new stroke cases every year, accounting for nearly 10 per cent of the global stroke burden (World Stroke Organization Global Stroke Fact Sheet 2025; Global Burden of Disease Study 2021). Stroke remains one of the leading causes of death and long-term disability in the country. Studies further indicate that almost 90 per cent of stroke cases are associated with preventable risk factors, including hypertension, diabetes, tobacco use, unhealthy diet, obesity and physical inactivity (World Health Organization, 2025; Global Burden of Disease Study 2021). These alarming statistics underline the urgent need to equip ordinary citizens with basic life-saving skills.

In remote regions such as Garo Hills, where reaching specialised healthcare facilities often takes considerable time, the ability of ordinary citizens to provide immediate assistance can make the difference between life and death. If Village Heads, teachers, students, drivers, police personnel, Home Guards, transport workers and community volunteers are trained in CPR, basic first aid and emergency response techniques, many lives can be saved before professional medical help arrives.

If the District Medical & Health Office, Tura, in collaboration with educational institutions, the police, transport authorities, voluntary organisations and local bodies, organises regular CPR, first-aid and stroke-awareness training camps across the region, it will help build a network of informed first responders capable of providing timely assistance until professional medical care arrives.

A few hours of training today could save many precious lives tomorrow.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

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"People fall forward to success."

— Mary Kay Ash

The Shillong Times

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Is Buildings On Rivers Permitted?

MEGHALAYA has several regulatory authorities, but none bother to implement the rules prescribed by the Government from time to time. Whether monitoring river pollution within Shillong city or the much-discussed Byrnihat Industrial complex, the Meghalaya Pollution Control Board (SPCB) is in a state of perpetual denial. At this point, it is imperative for the Government of Meghalaya to establish an independent pollution monitoring agency and stop relying on its own ineffective Pollution Control Board. While the Chief Minister announced that all rivers in and around Shillong would be cleaned up in time for the National Games in 2027, the plight of the Umkhrah and Umshyrpi Rivers remains pathetic. Groups cleaning the Umkaliar River collect several tonnes of garbage on a bi-monthly basis. Yet the MSPCB has not once inspected the entire stretch of the Umkaliar River to determine which of the four Dorbar Shnong localities—Lapalang, Nongrah, Rynjah, Umpling, or Nongmynsong—is the heaviest polluter. These shnongs should actually be heavily penalized for killing the Umkaliar River, not only by dumping garbage into it but also by allowing kitchen wastewater and septic tank contents to flow directly into the river and by permitting vehicles to be washed in it. This despite the amended Meghalaya Building Bye-Laws, 2021, which states that where a plot is located adjacent to a water body (stream or river), the building regulations are to be governed additionally by the Meghalaya Water Bodies (Conservation & Protection) Guidelines.

Under the Meghalaya Water Bodies (Conservation & Protection) Guidelines, the minimum setback depends on the width of the river: If the width of the river is 3 metres the minimum setback or distance from the river on which a residential or other building can be built is 3 metres away from the river. If the width of the river is more than 3 metres wide the setback has to be 6 metres wide. The amendment fundamentally changed how construction near rivers is regulated. Instead of prescribing a single setback in the Building Bye-Laws themselves, it links building permissions to the more detailed Meghalaya Waterbodies (Conservation and Protection) Amendment Guidelines, 2023. The amendment stipulates that anyone constructing a building beside a river must comply not only with the Building Bye-Laws (setbacks from roads, neighbours, FAR, height, etc.) but also with the Waterbodies Guidelines.

The Guidelines also create a regulated zone beyond the setback. Its width is four times the applicable waterbody setback. Within this regulated zone, development is controlled rather than absolutely prohibited, and additional environmental and planning restrictions may apply. The amended Guidelines further prohibit or restrict hoardings, billboards and certain buildings within the waterbody setback and regulated zones where necessary to preserve scenic vistas and unobstructed views of rivers and streams. In effect therefore the Meghalaya Water Bodies (Conservation & Protection) Amendment Guidelines, 2023, strictly prescribe how buildings whether residential or otherwise cannot violate the waterbody setback but along the Umkaliar River new buildings, including a church have come up right on the water body and the Dorbar Shnong, the KHADC and the other regulatory authorities of the Government including the Pollution Control Board are all looking the other way. This is Meghalaya's congenital disorder – that laws are made to be flouted with impunity and no one really cares to take action against violators. Will the Government please respond?

Who Are the Jaintia? Colonial Records and the Question of Khasi Identity

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Ever since the state anthem was announced, there has been resistance from a section of the Khasis, the Synteng in particular, who insist that the lack of the inclusion of Pnar (the language spoken by them) words amounts to discrimination and ignores the history of the Jaintia, who are a community distinct from the Khasi. The question, therefore, is whether the Synteng constitute a group distinct from the Khasi, and what is meant by the term Jaintia, another name by which the Synteng identify themselves. At least from a linguistic, genetic, and cultural perspective, the Synteng form part of the larger Khasi group. The question of including them under the term Khasi, however, is also a political one. Since the Khasi maintained an oral culture, it is only the colonial documents that can help in this regard. We will go through some of these colonial documents to understand how the British viewed the people living in what today constitute the districts of Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, and Ri Bhoi.

The first document is the latest among them, History of Assam, written by E. Gait and published in 1926. This was almost a hundred years after the British had come into contact with the Khasi. The book has a chapter devoted to the Jaintia, titled "The Jaintia Kings." In the second paragraph of the chapter, Gait writes: "The dominions of the Raja of Jaintia include two distinct tracts of country, namely the Jaintia Hills which is inhabited by a Khasi tribe called Synteng, and the plains country, south of these hills and north of the Barak river, in the Sylhet district, now known as Jaintia parganas, the inhabitants of which are Bengali Hindus and Muhammadans." A few sentences later he also states that "There is practically no difference between the inhabitants of the Khasi, and those of the Jaintia Hills … they speak the same language – Khasi …" As far as Gait is concerned, the Synteng are part of the larger Khasi tribe, and there is no distinction between them.

We now turn to an earlier publication, and perhaps the most famous one, The Khasis by P. R. T. Gurdon, first published in 1907. This was less than fifty years after the rebellion of U Kiang Nongbah, the last great revolt against British rule in the hills. In the introduction to the book, it is stated that the languages of the "Khasi nation" are four in number: "the standard literary form, founded on the language of Cherrapunji, the Pnar or Synteng, of Jowai, the War, spoken in the valleys on the southern face of the hills, and the Lyngngam, spoken in the tract adjacent to the Garos on the west."

Later in the book, Gurdon identifies the locations where the different groups are found. He writes that "the Syntengs, or Pnars, (inhabit) the Jaintia Hills … (which) take their name from the Rajas of Jaintia, the former rulers of this part of the country, who had as their capital Jaintiapur … which now falls within the boundaries of the Sylhet district." From this it becomes clear that the Synteng (with the word Pnar also being used interchangeably to describe them) are a linguistic group. We also get an idea of the origin of the word Jaintia, which comes from the capital Jaintiapur, where the inhabitants were mostly Bengali Hindus and Muslims.

Thus, Jaintia is not a Khasi word but most likely a Bengali one. In fact, the Jayantia Buranji reveals that it was derived from the name of the Hindu goddess Jayanteshwari (supposed to be an incarnation of Durga), the patron deity of the Hindu kingdom of Jaintiapur before it was conquered by Hima Sutnga in the sixteenth century. Jaintia was therefore a term used for everyone who lived in Hima Jaintiapur, meaning that even the Bengali subjects would refer to themselves as Jaintia. It was not a term used exclusively to identify the Synteng.

We now come to perhaps the most interesting of all the colonial documents, Papers Relating to the Disturbance in Khasi and Jaintia Hills, published in 1864. It is a record of the correspondence between British officers as they attempted to suppress the rebellion led by U Kiang Nongbah. It is a fascinating document and even contains references to the places that took part in the rebellion and to the bravery of the Khasi warriors who fought for their independence. According to one of the letters, the reason for the rebellion was "the interference with the religion of the Khassyahs (Khasis)." In another letter, it is stated that "the hope … that the Khassyahs (Khasis) of Jynteeah (Jaintia) Hills would accept the offer of pardon … has now passed away." Those who rebelled under the leadership of U Kiang Nongbah were referred to as Khasis, and the same terminology appears in several other letters as well.

Perhaps the clearest example that those who rebelled against the British were regarded as Khasi is found in the following sentence: "I am directed by the Governor General in council to request that His Honor the Lieutenant-Governor will favor this Government without delay, with a detailed statement of plan operations which his honor proposes to adopt with a view to the suppression of the Cossyah (Khasi) rebellion in the Jynteeah (Jaintia) Hills." For the British, U Kiang Nongbah was therefore a Khasi rebel from the Jaintia Hills, and his rebellion could, from a Khasi nationalist perspective, be regarded as the second war of Khasi independence after the earlier struggle led by U Tirot Sing. He was captured with the help of "a party led by a Khassyah (Khasi) of the name Oollong (U Long) Sattoonga (Sutnga), a resident of the village of Nurteng (Nartiang?)."

The document also contains the testimony of U Kiang Nongbah, descriptions of the various battles with the British, and indications of the respect the British held for the bravery and determination of the Khasi warriors. There is even a description of how the present institution of the Dorbar Shnong came into being, as a system designed to help the British keep the local population under control. The description of the capture and testimony of U Kiang Nongbah is particularly interesting, and the British acknowledged that he accepted his fate without showing any fear. There is also mention of his widow and two children, and one wonders whether his descendants might still be traced after such a long period.

It is therefore clear that the British consistently regarded the inhabitants of the Jaintia Hills as belonging to the Khasi community. But does that mean it is appropriate to use Jaintia as a synonym for Khasi? This question is addressed in an earlier document, Report on Khasi and Jaintia Hills by A. J. M. Mills, published in 1853.

According to Mills, the Khasi are a tribe of people who inhabit the portion of the hills bordering Mymensingh and Sylhet on one side and Assam on the other. In his section on the Jaintia Hills, he states that "the inhabitants of the Jaintia Hills consist of Lalung (Tiwa), Mikirs (Karbi), and Khasias." Thus, Jaintia did not refer only to the Synteng but also included the Mikir and Tiwa. He also describes how the Jaintia Hills came to be administered separately from the Khasi Hills, which ultimately was a matter of administrative technicality.

Thus, there is little doubt, at least from the colonial documents, that the Synteng or Pnar formed part of the larger Khasi group. The term Jaintia did not refer exclusively to the Synteng but also included non-Khasi groups. Will those advocating a separate identity also allow these non-Khasi groups to enjoy the same benefits they claim under the label Jaintia, such as reservations and rights relating to land ownership and transfer, since these groups would also fall under the umbrella of Jaintia? If not, is that not inconsistent with the historical meaning of the term?

The term Jaintia was never of Khasi origin and therefore, in this interpretation, cannot be used interchangeably with Khasi. There is no Jaintia tribe or ethnic community as such. Rather, there are the Synteng or Pnar, along with the War, and other non-Khasi groups such as the Tiwa, Karbi, and Biate, all of whom were subjects of Hima Jaintiapur. Thus, if the term Jaintia is used as a geographical or territorial designation referring to people from the former Hima Jaintiapur polity, its use may be acceptable. It is, however, not appropriate to use the term as an ethnic designation. Therefore, only the term Khasi is the historically legitimate ethnonym for the community. Any other interpretation reflects a misunderstanding of the history and culture of the land and its people.

(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)

Ayodhya scandal signals systemic decay

By Jagdish Rattanani

The snowballing scandal over allegations of misappropriation of donations and offerings at the Ram Janmabhoomi temple at Ayodhya is the latest shocker in an all-enveloping sense of collapse that has gripped a range of Indian institutions. Our political systems, constitutional bodies, independent watchdogs and now places of faith and worship appear to swim in the same muddy waters. This casts an air of gloom over the direction of a nation with mounting cases of corruption – from exam paper leaks to land grabs and banking scandals – that are in plain sight of the people.

It is easy to see the scandal at Ayodhya as a new low. This is, after all, the place that stood at the heart of the BJP's volatile mix of politics and religion and contributed to the party's rise on the national scene, taking it from a low of two seats in the 1984 Lok Sabha to 282 seats in 2014. In that sense, this is a scandal in the heart of the BJP's political sanctum sanctorum. It mocks the devotion and reverence of millions of the faithful who have contributed to the construction, maintenance and upkeep of the Ram temple. Some 500 million devotees are said to have visited the temple since it was consecrated on Jan 22, 2024, according to the Uttar Pradesh government. That even such a venerable icon of faith is at risk of being plundered by the very people entrusted with its construction and upkeep is a lament that signifies what this new low might look like.

Now, reports have come in that Champat Rai, the all-powerful general secretary of the 'Shri Ram Janmbhoomi Teerth Kshetra', the trust that manages the temple, has resigned. A Special Investigation Team has been set up by the Uttar Pradesh government, and eight people have been arrested as investigations continue. This is part of the standard political and administrative response to a standard scandal. Action of this kind is meant to restore faith but here the erosion of faith signals something much more significant.

It brings home to the faithful what a breakdown of governance looks like. Hitherto, questions on democracy, transparency, due process, integrity and the like—which are all weak wickets for the establishment—were seen as questions limited to the politics of the day. If politics is murky, those in politics must learn to play the game while they keep their hold and expand their agenda. This simplistic split view of governance – that 'bad' governance can be ringfenced and some 'good' can come out of it – collapses in the scandal at the Ram temple. It illustrates to an audience that has so far refused to ask the hard questions of the day that a governance collapse sinks the nation and everyone with it, believers and the non-believers in one boat. Bad governance thus works like an all-consuming fire that will burn everything down.

In this light, the scandal at Ayodhya is not a new low really. It is all too expected as the slippery slope of a journey focused only on the ends without caring for the means. The collapse at Ayodhya is thus a logical culmination of a system of leadership, governance and capture of power that believes in and lives by the edict that results matter and how we get to the results does not. In allowing this path, we bid goodbye to the one principle that Indian spiritual traditions hold above all others – that dharma must lead and artha can only follow, or that values are at the heart of the Indian way of living and thriving. Nothing in the Indian tradition counts as success or achievement when it is attained by the wrong means. It is a powerful Indian spiritual lesson, reiterated in countless discourses and kathas that all is lost when values are violated in pursuit of a goal, however noble the goal may be. True, there are grey areas and dilemmas but they, too, must be approached with an eye on living the values. Anything less is convenience for the short term that will come back to bite in the long term. The Ram temple controversy tells us that all this knowledge is turned on its head. The plunder is limited not to the material assets, but is a demolition of the civilisational and spiritual traditions by the very people who claim to defend them.

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The renowned scholar and teacher of Advaita Vedanta in contemporary times, Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1930-2015), who Prime Minister Narendra Modi had considered his spiritual guru, spoke of this binding duty toward a life of values. Swami Dayananda taught the idea of understanding not just the values but also the value of living by those values, captured in his book titled "Value of Values". He wrote: "The expression of my life is just the expression of my well-assimilated value structure. Only assimilated values are my personal values … (They) reflect what is valuable to me." In this teaching, values are to be internalised and become an inseparable part of the person internalising them. Their practice then comes naturally and is not imposed. Everything else becomes a charade played out in the name of values.

Yet, there is a complex and deep play about values. They appear to be of little use when results can be achieved violating every value, in letter and in spirit. As the clever and the smart begin to enjoy the game and notch up what is seen as success after success sans a value system, as has been the case with the ruling establishment in India, they set up the system for a spectacular collapse. Trust disappears, systemic decay sets in and every achievement begins to ring hollow as yesterday's markers of "success" reveal themselves today to be the stepping stones to a monumental collapse.

Indeed, one of the best lessons on values comes to us from Gandhi who saw no distinction between means and ends – the means are the ends because they are the seeds that will flower tomorrow. A rotten seed cannot grow into a useful tree after all.

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

Letters to the Editor

Tainted Men, Borrowed Power: MCA Holds Up Matriliny Mirror

Editor,

Your editorial of June 30 'Matriliny Brutalised', gave me a heavy heart, but also a strange sense of vindication. For years, Meghalaya has worn its matrilineal identity like a badge of progressiveness, as though the mere act of a child taking the mother's surname absolves an entire society of its sins against women. Your editorial called this out for what it is, a "sardonic attitude which only sounds good in songs and poetry." I couldn't agree more. And nowhere this seems more true while following the unfolding crisis at the Meghalaya Cricket Association.

What seems to be happening at the MCA gives us a small, ugly window into how power actually behaves when a woman's dignity is placed on one side of the scale and a man's career on the other. Recent media reports suggest that the association's Secretary, an official named Rayonald Kharkamni, stands suspended in the face of covering up and neglecting sexual harassment complaints of women cricketers. And yet, in the face of findings this damning, what have we witnessed from a significant section of the association's male membership? Not introspection or shame. Not solidarity with the young women whose careers and safety were put at risk. Instead, an almost desperate and theatrical defence of a tainted office-bearer, mounted with more energy than was ever spent defending the women themselves.

I do not say this lightly, and I do not say it about all men. The MCA President has at least acted on the Commission's findings, suspended the officer concerned, and stood by the women rather than the institution's convenience. He has, quite publicly, put principle above the comfort of the old boys' club even if there seems to be significant retaliation against him from within the MCA. But his is, distressingly, a lonely fight. For every step he has taken, there seems to be a chorus of male voices rushing to shield the Secretary not because the facts are in doubt, but because his continuation in office is convenient to their own hold on power. That is what frightens me most: this was never really about loyalty to a colleague. It is about the desperation of a man clinging to a chair he should have vacated the moment these findings came to light, and the willingness of others around him to mistake that desperation for a cause worth defending.

I ask a simple question of these men: would they extend the same fierce, unconditional loyalty if it were their own sister or daughter who had been let down, ignored, or endangered? I suspect not. Solidarity that evaporates the moment it is inconvenient to power is not solidarity at all. It is self-interest wearing the mask of brotherhood. And a society that romanticises matriliny while its men behave this way in boardrooms and dressing rooms is not matrilineal in any meaningful sense. It is a patriarchy with better public relations.

What unsettles me further is the thought that the MCA, for all its faults, is at least an institution where the facts are surfacing, where one man at the top has had the courage to act, and where a newspaper as old and credible as yours is willing to print the word "brutalised" in the same sentence as "matriliny." If this is what we are seeing in an association under some public scrutiny, what must be happening in the other sports associations of this state? In sports bodies across this country? Where there might be no President willing to risk his own reputation to do right for young women athletes?

If the men of this society cannot find their collective conscience and speak against this kind of blatant disregard for women, whether in cricket associations, in public spaces, or in marriages, then perhaps it is time the women of Meghalaya stop waiting for that conscience to arrive. Collective, unapologetic action by women, inside institutions like the MCA and outside them, may achieve in months what decades of polite appeals to "matrilineal values" have failed to deliver. Otherwise, your editorial's warning will prove tragically prophetic, and our matriliny will remain brutalised, not by outsiders, but by our own.

Yours etc.,
S Lyngdoh,
Via Email

Declare River Pollution a Criminal Offence

Editor,

Every time I see the members of Operation Clean-Up with their rakes, hoes, and spades clearing the riverbanks, I am reminded of their amazing dedication. It clearly shows that only a handful of citizens sincerely care about the cleanliness of our city. The rest behave as if rivers are bottomless dustbins! They are completely blind to the damage their careless habits cause.

If we look more closely, waste dumping, hill cutting, and rapid urbanisation have already hit the fragile ecosystem of Shillong hard. Rivers that once carried clear water, used not just for washing clothes but also for drinking, now stink with filth. Why can't the government think of rejuvenating them? What is holding them back? Yes, some drains are so choked that even a short downpour turns them into instant flood zones, especially in Polo. This is not just an inconvenience; it is a threat to public health and to the beauty of our town.

Enough is enough. We cannot keep patting offenders on the back while they poison our rivers and streams so mindlessly. We need strong solutions without delay. It is time to deal a "knockout punch" to this filthy habit. The only answer, I believe, is to make dumping garbage into rivers and streams a serious "criminal offence". Heavy fines and short jail terms can only make people think twice. In Ireland, offenders face fines of up to €5,000 (approximately Rs 5,00,000) and even a year in jail for polluting the environment. If such strict measures feel too harsh for us, we can at least begin with penalties of Rs. 3,000 and a three-day jail term. I am quite sure this will bring about a dramatic change! For the law to have a real deterrent effect, authorities must be determined to identify and prosecute offenders without mercy. The government should also install CCTV cameras at key locations to hunt down violators.

Citizens, too, can play a supportive role. If people do not get tired of taking endless selfies, why not use that skill to discreetly photograph offenders who dump waste into drains and rivers and upload the evidence to the Shillong Municipal Board or the DC office's websites with some details? Those who report violators could be "rewarded" with some percentage of the penalty amount. This would further encourage vigilance and help break the cycle of dirty habits. Kerala has already shown how "community reporting" through WhatsApp can work wonders. And isn't this exactly what we need, when people keep tossing mattresses, blankets, quilts, and even broken TVs, keyboards, and what not into our rivers?

Of course, it is heartening to learn that the Deputy Commissioner of East Khasi Hills is also willing to join the Operation Clean-Up drive. The involvement of the CEO of the Shillong Municipal Board would be still more expected. When the top officials stand shoulder to shoulder with citizens, it sends a powerful message.

Shillong cannot afford to lose its rivers and streams to this neglect. Environmental pollution must be branded a "criminal offence" without any further delay. Look at Sikkim -- spotless, scenic, and thriving on tourism, with citizens strongly supportive of maintaining cleanliness and a healthy environment. If Sikkim can attract tourists year-round and "mint money", why can't Shillong? Our countless homestay operators open their doors with warm hospitality, hoping simply to earn a livelihood. Wouldn't clean rivers and a healthy environment make Shillong even more inviting?

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

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"Prove yourself to yourself, not others"

— Steven Pressfield

The Shillong Times

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Silence over Ayodhya

THE Ayodhya Ram Temple funds case is getting curiouser, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's silence on the massive loot at one of the epicentres of Hindu faith is surprising. He zealously promoted the cause of the temple throughout the past 12 years of his governance. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad has distanced itself from the misappropriations of epic proportions over the past few years by saying it had nothing to do with this. This in itself offers no relief. That the temple trust-chief, Champat Rai, functioned as the vice president of the VHP is no small matter. While there is no evidence to suspect his direct role in the disappearance of crores, his resignation from the trust post is significant. It was the VHP's spirited pursuit of the Ayodhya cause that led to the erection of the temple through huge collections of donations from near and far. Millions of Hindu devotees had donated funds and also bricks etc., for the temple's grand construction. The Prime Minister's personal presence to lead the consecration rites, though this raised the eyebrows of secularists, makes it imperative that the PM personally intervene and set things right at the epochal centre of Hindu faith.

The Sangh Parivar's temptation to blame an outsourced agency, citing the reason that sent its personnel for counting donations, does not absolve the top temple functionaries of the blame. That a top VHP leader oversaw the functioning of the temple where such a loot took place is a sad commentary on how entities linked to religion conducted themselves. The rise of the BJP as the governing political establishment in recent decades might have contributed to the creeping in of wrong tendencies in such entities, which had previously raised no accusations in financial matters. However, the reports of large-scale embezzlement in Ayodhya now would work to the BJP's disadvantage in the Hindi belt. Assembly elections are due in Uttar Pradesh in six months' time. The Yogi Adityanath government, with its intelligence apparatus, should have known what was going wrong in the hallowed environments of the high-profile temple. Rather, the government let down the faithful. The Opposition is bound to raise this as a major issue in the election campaign not just in UP but also in other Hindi-belt states where elections take place in the near future.

The proposed investigations by the CBI, in addition to the probe initiated by the UP police, are unlikely to produce any result and might end up as an eyewash. Central investigating agencies today suffer from a credibility crisis and are known for dragging investigations instead of giving the seriousness that such probes deserve. While such agencies had always been under political pressure, their image as "caged parrots," doing the bidding of their political bosses has increasingly been reinforced in recent years. There is less reason for the faithful to feel confident that the misappropriated funds from their donations to the Lord would be retrieved and restored to the temple's coffers.

Behdienkhlam: The Covenant of U Lakriah and the Four Sisters

By Dr Omarlin Kyndiah

As the monsoon approaches Jowai prepares yet again to host one of its most profound cultural and spiritual expressions-Behdienkhlam, celebrated this year from July 6-9. Beneath the rhythm of drums, the splendour of decorated rong or rots, and the energy of thousands gathered at Aitnar, lies a deeper story that continues to shape the identity of the Pnar people: a story of divine covenant, ancestral memory, and the enduring philosophy of Niamtre.

To witness Behdienkhlam is to witness more than a festival. It is to encounter a living worldview in which mythology, morality, kinship, and community converge. At its heart stands the ancient narrative of U Syiem Lakriah, the chosen intermediary between U Tre Kirot, the Supreme Creator, and humanity.

According to Pnar oral tradition, when U Tre Kirot first entrusted the Niaw Wasa with the earth, the land was barren and unyielding. Life was fragile, uncertain, and without form. In the words of a Jaintia saying, "Chna Yung i step pat i miet, chna yung i miet pat i step," meaning that in such a rocky and soil-less landscape, no house (yung) could stand securely whether built by day or by night because the earth itself offered no stable foundation for human settlement.

In compassion, U Tre Kirot responded to the prayers of U Lakriah, commanding Ka Bei Rymaw, the Earth Mother, to offer three basketfuls of soil known as ka le khoh le sun so that the earth might become fertile and habitable. Through this divine act, land became life, and humanity found its footing upon creation.

From this sacred beginning emerged not only survival, but a moral order. In the celestial realm, it is believed, U Tre Kirot convened a Dorbar Blai, a divine council that established the principles by which life on earth must be guided. This sacred order became the foundation of Niamtre, the indigenous faith of the Jaintia and Khasi peoples-less a doctrine of rituals, and more a philosophy of right living. Yet the divine narrative did not end there.

As humanity settled and flourished, U Lakriah was chosen to guide the people as the bearer of divine instruction. Through him, the connection between heaven and earth was sustained, often symbolised in tradition by the appearance of a rainbow-a sign of peace, continuity, and divine presence. But when the purpose of creation had been fulfilled, U Tre Kirot declared that He would no longer appear among the people in visible form.

Seeing the sorrow of humanity, a covenant was made. U Lakriah interceded, and it was agreed that the Creator would return once every year to dwell among the people for four days and three nights, during which humanity would honour Him not through sacrifice alone, but through joy, dance, gratitude, and unity. This sacred promise became the spiritual seed of Ka Chad Soo Sngi Le Iaw, the ancient form of what is now known as Behdienkhlam.

The festival, whose name literally means "driving away the plague," evolved through centuries of lived experience. Oral tradition recalls that during outbreaks of cholera (ka Khlam prai pynhiar) in the plains of Jaintiapur, fear and devastation spread into the hills. In response, the community gave form to its collective prayer through ritual, transforming symbolic action into cultural memory. What was once a response to suffering became a timeless expression of resilience.

Agrarian societies across the world mark their relationship with nature through harvest festivals. In the Northeast, Bihu stands as one of the most widely celebrated expressions of gratitude for the earth's abundance. Among the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo peoples, Shad Suk Mynsiem, Behdienkhlam, and Wangala similarly embody thanksgiving to nature and the Creator for sustenance and renewal. Over time, these festivals have become woven into folklore, carrying within them incantations, myths, and moral codes that reflect the deep relationship between human life and the natural world.

In its earlier form, Behdienkhlam was known as Ka Chad Soo Sngi Le Iaw, a dance lasting four days, of which three coincided with market days. As population and settlement patterns expanded across the Jaintia Hills, the festival evolved and became organised around the Ki Soo Langdoh- the four priestly villages of Chyrmang, Jowai, Tuber, and Ialong-each carrying its own ritual responsibilities.

Over time, symbolic elements were added. The Ki Rong, elaborately decorated tableaux, once featured headless animal forms representing the presence of disease and misfortune, later transformed into artistic expressions of community identity. At the centre of the ritual remains Aitnar, the sacred pond of Jowai, where the rots are ultimately immersed signifying the return of disorder to the depths and the restoration of harmony on earth.

But Behdienkhlam is not only a ritual response to disease or misfortune. It is also deeply rooted in kinship and creation. According to tradition, after the descent of humanity through the golden ladder (Ka Tangnoob Tangjri), U Lakriah was appointed as the custodian of divine instruction, ensuring that the laws of life were communicated to the people. At the same time, divine companions descended to earth. The Thunder God, Syiem Pyrthat, along with sacred stone deities and river spirits establishing a cosmic order in which nature itself participates in the well-being of humanity.

Within this sacred unfolding, the story of the Four Sisters- Ka Bon, Ka Teiñ, Ka Wet, and Ka Doh occupies a central place. As progenitrix of the principal clans, they represent the foundations of kinship upon which Pnar society rests. Their journey to Loom Sooyung in Jowai is remembered as the moment when divine order took root in human society, giving rise to the founding clans known collectively as the Phra Kur Phra Kmai.

From these ancestral roots emerged the social institutions that continue to define community life-the Dalloi, Pator, Langdoh, and other traditional custodians of faith and governance. In this way, kinship is not merely genealogical; it is moral and spiritual, binding individuals into a shared responsibility for one another.

This philosophy is expressed most clearly in the teachings of Niamtre, which rests on three enduring principles: Kamai Yei Hok-to earn honestly and righteously; Tip Bru Tip Blai-to serve humanity as a path to knowing God; and Tip Kur Tip Kha-to honour one's maternal and paternal kin. These principles affirm that spirituality is inseparable from daily life. One's relationship with the Divine is reflected in how one lives with others.

The social ethics of Niamtre find further expression in Ka Sngi Kylliang Ka Nongkylliang, the obligation of mutual care within the community. This is not an abstract ideal but a lived practice, once beautifully illustrated in the tradition of E Ja Khonbo, where neighbours collectively supported a young mother nursing two infants. In such moments, compassion became social law, and care became worship.

Behdienkhlam embodies these teachings in action. Every dong participates in the making of the rots. Every household contributes to preparation. Ritual offerings, libations, and ancestral remembrance reinforce the bonds between the living and the departed. The immersion of the rots at Aitnar is not merely symbolic; it is a collective acknowledgment that disorder must return to where it came from, allowing renewal to take place.

The festival unfolds over four sacred days, beginning with acts of collection and preparation, followed by sacrificial offerings at Aitnar, the cutting and erection of sacred wooden structures, and culminating in prayers, dances, and the final immersion ritual. At every stage, the presence of ancestors, deities, and community members is invoked, reinforcing a worldview in which life is continuous and interconnected.

In the modern world, new forms of khlam have emerged-loneliness amidst connectivity, disconnection within families, environmental degradation, and the erosion of cultural values. Against this backdrop, Behdienkhlam acquires renewed relevance. It reminds us that true progress is not measured only in material terms, but in the strength of relationships, the integrity of values, and the depth of communal life.

As the drums once again echo across Jowai this July, they carry the memory of U Lakriah's covenant, the blessings of the Four Sisters, and the enduring wisdom of Niamtre. They call upon a people not only to remember their past, but to live their values in the present.

For in the end, Behdienkhlam is not merely a festival to be witnessed. It is a philosophy to be lived and a reminder that humanity flourishes when it lives in harmony with the Divine, with nature, and with one another.

The Decline in Solidarity Among Young People

By Pyndap Lyngdoh

It is often said by leaders, elders, and public figures that youth are the future of the nation and society. This statement carries deep truth, because the strength, energy, and creativity of youth are essential for the progress of any community. Young people are not only the future leaders of the country, but also the present force that can speak up for justice, protect social values, and bring positive change. However, despite this important role, a serious concern remains: why are some young people showing less solidarity, less social concern, and less willingness to take part in the welfare of society?

It must first be understood that not all young people are the same. Many are active, responsible, and ready to stand up for the common good. They are willing to speak against injustice, help those in need, and contribute to the development of their communities. These young people show that youth can be a powerful force for social transformation. However, there are others who remain silent, distant, or unconcerned about social issues. This difference in attitude has become a matter of concern, especially at a time when society expects young people to be more aware, more active, and more united.

One of the main reasons behind this problem is the lack of proper guidance. Many young people do not receive enough education about their responsibilities toward society, their community, and the nation.

One of the main reasons behind this problem is the lack of proper guidance. Many young people do not receive enough education about their responsibilities toward society, their community, and the nation. They may learn academic subjects, but they are not always taught the importance of cooperation, public spirit, and collective responsibility. As a result, some grow up without fully understanding that social progress depends not only on individual success but also on unity and shared effort. When guidance is weak, many young people fail to realize that their voice and participation matter.

Another important reason is the pressure of modern life. Today, many young people are caught in a fast-moving world where they must think about education, employment, financial security, and personal survival. In such a situation, it becomes easy to focus only on oneself and forget broader social responsibilities. Struggles related to jobs and livelihood often leave little time or energy for social involvement. Some young people may even feel that their own problems are too heavy to allow them to think about the problems of others. This does not mean they do not care; rather, it shows that they are burdened by circumstances that make active participation more difficult.

The influence of mobile phones, social media, and entertainment also plays a role, though it is not the only cause. These things are not harmful by themselves, but when they consume too much time and attention, they can reduce real-world interaction and weaken the habit of community engagement. Many young people spend more time online than they do in meaningful conversations, community meetings, or social work. This can slowly create distance between them and the people around them. However, it would be unfair to blame technology alone, because the deeper issue is the lack of awareness, discipline, and social education that should help young people use these tools wisely.

The lack of opportunities for participation is another major factor. In many places, young people are not given enough space to take part in community discussions, local decision-making, or social activities. When their opinions are ignored, they may begin to feel that their contribution is not valued. Over time, this can lead to silence, disinterest, or withdrawal. On the other hand, when young people are trusted, encouraged, and included, they often respond with enthusiasm and dedication. They become more confident, more responsible, and more willing to serve the community.

Leadership also matters greatly. Young people need role models, mentors, and leaders who can guide them in the right direction. Without such leadership, many are left confused or disconnected. A strong leader does not only give orders, but also inspires, teaches, and creates opportunities for growth. When youth are guided by people who understand their struggles and potentials, they are more likely to develop a sense of duty and solidarity. Good leadership can help young people see that social involvement is not a burden, but a meaningful part of life.

Despite the government's efforts to involve young people through various Chief Minister's programs, a significant gap remains between policy intention and actual participation. Many youths are still unaware of these initiatives, while others lack the proper guidance needed to understand how to apply, engage, and benefit from the opportunities provided. This suggests that awareness campaigns and on-ground support need to be strengthened so that the programs can reach the intended audience more effectively. For these initiatives to have a meaningful impact they must be accompanied by clear communication, accessible information, and practical mentorship that helps young people participate with confidence and purpose.

It is also important to remember that the decline in solidarity is not because young people are incapable or unworthy. In fact, youth have great potential to become the strongest support of society. Their energy, ideas, courage, and willingness to change can transform communities in powerful ways. What they need is encouragement, proper education, employment opportunities, and chances to participate in public life. If society invests in young people, then young people can invest in society in return.

From the perspective of a young person, this issue is not simply about laziness or indifference. It is about the realities of life, the lack of guidance, the absence of opportunities, and the pressure to survive in a demanding world. Yet there is still hope. If the family, school, community, and society work together to inspire youth, then a positive change can happen. Young people can be taught to think beyond themselves, to value unity, and to understand that the progress of society depends on collective effort. When they are given the chance to participate, they can slowly change their mindset and become active contributors to the welfare of the nation.

Conclusion:

The decline in solidarity among young people is a serious issue, but it is not permanent. It can be improved through education, guidance, leadership, and meaningful participation. Young people are not the problem of society; they are part of the solution. With the right support, they can become the voice of justice, the strength of the community, and the driving force for social change.

Letters to the Editor

Traffic Management or Mismanagement? A Plea for Logic at Rhino and Barik Points

Editor,

I am writing to express my profound frustration regarding the current traffic flow regulations enforced by the Shillong Traffic Police, specifically concerning the mandatory diversions for commuters traveling toward Laban, Lumshatsngi, Lawsohtun, and Rilbong. This appears to have been in effect since July 1, 2026 and this mismanagement needs to be pointed out to the concerned authorities through your esteemed newspaper.

As it stands, a motorist coming from the Rilbong/ Anjalee Point area is prohibited from making a simple right turn at Rhino Point to head toward these residential localities. Instead, we are forced to travel all the way to Barik Point, only to turn back and navigate all the way to Rhino Point again just to make a left turn. This convoluted route adds an unnecessary 1.5 kilometers to every trip.

The absurdity of this "experiment" is further compounded at the Civil Hospital junction. Commuters intending to turn right are similarly denied access and are once again forced to travel to the already gridlocked Barik Point, only to double back through the same congested stretch.

I must ask: what is the logic behind forcing vehicles to contribute to further congestion on the Barik-Civil Hospital stretch? In a city already struggling with severe traffic bottlenecks, these directives seem to achieve the opposite of their intended purpose. We are being forced to waste precious time and burn expensive fuel navigating redundant loops, all while the primary arteries remain choked with vehicles that shouldn't need to be there in the first place.

While I understand the challenge of managing Shillong's narrow and complex road network, traffic management should be about efficiency and easing the burden on the public, not creating unnecessary obstacles. I urge the traffic authorities to revisit these directives. We need solutions that prioritize sensible traffic flow, not policies that turn a simple commute into a frustrating, circuitous ordeal.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Loud Speakers/ Loud Music continues after 10 PM

Editor,

I do not know about other residential areas, but as a former resident of Mawlai Mawroh and a present resident of Lumshyiap Langkyrding, I can personally attest that loudspeakers/music systems continue to be used well beyond 10 PM even after the order issued by the Deputy Commissioner, East Khasi Hills since 2023 and in violation of Supreme Court order dated 18.07.2025 in C.A. No. 3735 of 2005, which is mentioned in that Order, regarding prevention of sound pollution.

The sound from such loudspeakers is not confined to the specific vicinity of such celebrations but causes disturbance to other residents as well. One such incident of sound pollution happened recently until the morning hours of Wednesday, July 1st.

I implore all localities and residents to have some common sense for the common good and implement the above-mentioned order in letter and spirit, which arose from a good sense of the need to prevent noise pollution.

Yours etc.,
Kitdor H. Blah,
Shillong

Ethanol Blended Fuel Is Destroying Car Components

Editor,

My family bought a car in January 2023 and it functioned very smoothly for the past three years. However, since Nitin Gadkari introduced ethanol blending fuel even our car has started giving problems. First the mileage dropped and thereafter the air-conditioner stopped functioning. I really don't understand what is happening to our vehicles. It's not just the old cars; even new cars are also affected by ethanol-blended fuel. Why is the Government imposing ethanol on every vehicle whereas in other countries there is a choice and one can opt for ethanol-blended fuel or 100% petrol fuel? The Government allows its citizens this choice but here in INDIA we are being treated as guinea pigs. Are Indians now becoming subjects for some experiments?

Ethanol blending in petrol is an experiment and the results will be available by next year, the Union Government has told the Supreme Court. If the Government has already told the Supreme Court that this is an experimental phase, why is the experiment being carried out on such a massive scale, resulting in our vehicles being damaged? We middle-class citizens purchase vehicles with our hard-earned money and then without any rhyme or reason, our new cars are being damaged due to ethanol-blended fuel.

Why is the Government of India riding roughshod over the public by imposing ethanol-blended petrol on us? Some car insurance companies had even put up notices stating that if cars are spoilt due to ethanol-blended fuel, the insurance claim will be rejected by the company. In this case whom should we blame? We are in a dilemma as to what will happen if people using E-20 vehicles move on to E-27 and then E-30 vehicles? Will we then have to change our vehicles? This way the middle class will never be able to purchase a new vehicle because this entire strategy will hit the middle class the hardest. They will be under debt burdens for ever. They will never be free from car loans ever. I remember that film Lagaan where a Britisher said, "teen guna lagaan wasool karunga." (We will get back three times the taxes). This is what is happening with us right now if ethanol blended fuel is not stopped.

Everybody knows that making ethanol-blended fuel requires water, and the entire nation will soon run out of water as Mumbai is already facing a water crisis. We Indians are helpless before this Government, which is taking many wrong decisions and creating havoc among the public. The moisture in the fuel tank is causing car components to rust and replacing these components is very expensive which the public has to bear from their own pockets since claims get rejected due to ethanol-blended fuel.

Yours etc.,
Amit King
Shillong-4

Heat Wave Kills

Editor,

The heat wave that has swept across Europe has created a foreboding atmosphere in the continent. A large number of people have lost their lives in the horrendous heat. Sweltering temperatures have badly affected normal life. Over the years, the European continent famous for its cool atmosphere has shifted to a hot one in the summer season. This year's summer season has literally turned Europe into a hot oven. Dry air is transported to Europe from North Africa making the continent a rapidly heated place. Millions of people have experienced temperature above 30° C. Such an ominous occurrence serves as a warning to people and political leaders. Global warming caused by human activities comes back to haunt people. Nothing substantial is being done to combat global warming and climate change. Carbon emission, especially by developed countries continues unabated. Unless political leaders take practical measures to lessen the impact of global warming, extreme weather conditions will continue to torment people. Concerted efforts are essential to counter such a phenomenon. We must make earth a better place to live for posterity.

Yours etc.,
Venu GS,
Kollam

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K

"Start with what is right rather than what is acceptable."

— Franz Kafka

The Shillong Times

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Whither Financial Literacy

THE Press Information Bureau Shillong has kickstarted a heated debate on whether merely having a bank account qualifies as financial inclusion and financial literacy. The discussion concluded that financial literacy goes much beyond simply having a bank account or knowing how to use a mobile payment app which many in rural Meghalaya are still not comfortable with. At its core, financial literacy includes the ability to understand the range of bank products and investment plans; how to manage one's accounts online and to make informed decisions about money throughout one's life. In rural Meghalaya and to an extent in the urban hubs too many people still don't have long-term savings plans. A financially literate person understands how income is earned, makes weekly and monthly household budgets and saves whatever is possible even from a meagre income for future exigencies. Tribals generally do not as a rule have a saving habit but financial literacy demands that we understand the value of saving before spending. Often even bank loans for specific small enterprises end up being used to purchase consumer goods. Most small vendors don't keep accounts and hardly know how much the working capital is or what the profit earned per day is. Unless someone maintains a cash book how will they know their earnings from daily transactions?

For a rural household in Meghalaya, financial literacy also means keeping track of income and expenses; planning for regular payment of bills such as children's school fees, electricity and phone bills, expenses on food and transportation and also making allowances for ill health and keeping money aside for such emergencies. Above all it means avoiding unnecessary debts and setting financial priorities so that a family buys only what's needed and does not spend on unnecessary items such as clothes, shoes etc. because of some festival or celebration or the other. But above all financial literacy tells us why savings matter and the different places to save money in a risk-free environment. These days many families borrow from banks for various reasons. It is important to know the interest rates and repayment schedules and how much the family will ultimately have to repay with interest. Also important is knowing the consequences if the borrower defaults on repayment. A person who understands that a moneylender charging 5% per month is far more expensive than a bank charging 10–12% per year is demonstrating financial literacy.

Coming to digital empowerment, this is only possible if a person is financially literate. In rural areas villagers prefer to enter a bank if the person behind the counter can speak and understand their language. Too often banking staff don't show the inclination to provide the required hand-holding when semi-literate or illiterate villagers enter the bank. They come with apprehensions and it is only because of direct bank transfers that they are compelled to open accounts such as the Jan Dhan Account.Digital empowerment is a long way off because that means having a smartphone, knowing how to use it and above all having robust internet connectivity which in turn requires a stable power supply. All the above are still not guaranteed in Meghalaya's villages as yet. Digital Financial Literacy or digital empowerment means the ability to use debit cards at ATMs and to do so safely and also to make digital payments and to be able to memorise passwords and PINs etc. In this aspect, rural Meghalaya still has a long way to go. Hence it is important to introduce financial literacy at the middle school level and not wait to do it in high school and college.

Tea and Sugar: The Social Life of Red Tea in the Jaintia Hills

By Anna Notsu

In Meghalaya, people receive and offer tea throughout the day. During my research in the Jaintia Hills, there was hardly a day when I did not have tea. In fact, I often lost count of how many cups I had taken before sunset. 'Just take it without sugar,' my companion joked. 'Then you can take it as many cups as you like.'

At first, I assumed tea was simply a refreshment. Like coffee in many Western countries, it provides an immediate burst of energy. Yet after conducting long-term fieldwork in the Jaintia Hills, I realised that tea occupied a far more important place in everyday life. I often wondered about the slight excitement in the air when someone said, 'Dih Cha?' (Shall we take tea?). The question surfaced countless times a day: at home, in tea stalls, during interviews and in the middle of ordinary conversations. Drinking tea lasted no more than five to ten minutes, yet people seemed to welcome these pauses with surprising enthusiasm.

Preparing tea soon became one of my daily responsibilities. Too much tea leaf made the tea black rather than red, while too much sugar instantly spoiled its flavour. After many failed attempts, my host family finally trusted me to prepare tea for visitors. Soon after, I even began to receive compliments from our visitors on my tea. They would say contentedly, 'You know how to make good tea.' I was secretly delighted, as if I had received an approval that I had been accepted into Pnar society.

Yet one mystery remained. No matter what I did, whenever I made tea just for myself, it rarely tasted as good. Sometimes I could not even finish the cup. Each sip left an unexpected bitterness in both my mouth and my stomach.

The answer came one afternoon, when I mentioned this to my host father in Shangpung village, where I spent much of my time this year. Drinking tea with him had become part of our daily routine. Coming back from work, he would give me a shout from outside my small window: 'Dep dih cha?' (Have you taken tea already?). This was somewhat performative, as we both knew the answer before he asked. 'Pu em re!' (Not yet!), I would reply, although I was often already waiting for the invitation. This was a sweet custom of my research life in Shangpung. Even when I had already taken tea, he would insist I take it again, and of course, I never refused.

One afternoon, however, I was washing clothes outside. 'Chibet!' (Later!) I shouted back at his usual question. He laughed and replied that he would wait and join me. Then I said, while rinsing the soap off the clothes, 'That would be better because my tea never tastes good when I drink it alone.' To my surprise, he nodded immediately and added, 'Taking it alone is so boring. Tea tastes of nothing. Nothing!' What I had assumed was my own observation turned out to be shared understanding. Tea was not just something to drink, nor merely a source of energy. Drinking it alone seemed to defeat its very purpose.

For the nature of my research, my everyday life revolved around tea. Outside my house, I was usually on the receiving end. Often, together with my research companion, I went around many homes and tea stalls across the village. At some point during almost every conversation, usually exactly when I secretly yearned for tea, a woman or a young girl in jaiñkyrchah would quietly enter carrying a tray of red tea, along with biscuits and traditional Pnar snacks. Gradually, I began noticing that tea followed its own unwritten rules.

The timing of tea mattered. Tea was rarely served immediately after guests arrived. It usually came later. A friend of mine in Jowai once explained why. Serving tea straight away, she told me, could leave the impression that the hosts wanted the guests to leave soon. Delaying the tea, therefore, was a way of making a statement that they wanted guests to stay longer. It was a quiet gesture to make them feel welcome. This made me realise that I was doing it all wrong when I made tea for others at home – I should not have served it so quickly. What mattered was not simply the tea itself but the manner in which it was offered.

On a surface level, offering tea appears to be an act of hospitality. It expresses warmth, respect and generosity, through which relationships are sustained. Making one feel welcome is part of this offering. Yet people in Meghalaya also know that not everyone is offered tea.

A colleague of mine once said to me, 'If officers call for tea, that is a good sign. It means your interview went well.' During my research, I visited government officers, school principals and even judges. In such official settings, tea was not expected. These were busy interactions, and no one was obliged to offer anything.

Yet when someone did offer tea, the interaction subtly shifted. The conversation no longer felt entirely bureaucratic, and my interviewee often wanted to get to know me as a person rather than as a researcher. A relationship that might have ended with questions and answers was extended through a shared cup of tea. The offer of tea rested on the fact that it was not an obligation. Even if I tea was not offered, my relationship with them would not be necessarily harmed, nor did they necessarily need to sustain that relationship. In this sense, sharing tea, then, is a mutual agreement that the relationship is worth continuing beyond a matter of formality or mere hospitality.

Tea does not simply create or strengthen a relationship. It changes the character of the conversation itself. Offering tea can enable a moment of negotiation, in which refusal and acceptance take turns working on the existing relationship.

Over the course of my time in the Jaintia Hills, I also learned that offering tea does not always come with the freedom to refuse it. Much as I loved having tea, there were many occasions when I could not manage another cup. My stomach was already full of sweetened tea from earlier visits. 'No, kong, no need for tea,' I would politely insist. Yet I almost never succeeded in refusing the tea. My refusal was usually brushed aside. The host would smile and tell me that I must take tea in her house. Neither of us was performing politeness alone. She genuinely wanted me to accept, and I genuinely felt I had already had enough.

Later, when I mentioned this to a friend of mine, she was unsurprised. In fact, she remarked that I must, indeed, take tea. 'Of course you have to take tea,' she laughed. 'They know you don't chew on betel nut, so at least you must take tea.' When visiting others, taking tea was as important for the host as it was for the guest. Curiously, I also remembered occasions when visitors to our own house refused tea and no one objected. Acceptance and refusal, I realised, depended not on fixed rules, but on the particular relationship between host and guest, which was not grounded on any simple social obligation.

After several years in Meghalaya, I no longer think people drink tea simply because they enjoy it. The social work the tea performs is remarkably complex. Tea may be routinely yet carefully prepared, delayed, insisted upon, accepted, politely refused, paid for at a local tea stall or eventually offered for free as relationships shift. Through these everyday gestures, people signal who belongs, who does not, which relationships matter and which relationships are worth carrying a little further.

Perhaps, that is why tea never tasted quite right when I drank it alone. After all the effort I spent perfecting the balance of tea leaves and sugar, what was missing had never been in the cup. It was the people around it.

(The author is a PhD scholar from Leiden University, the Netherlands currently doing research in Jaintia Hills. Her PhD research is part of a five-year project, Futuring Heritage: Conservation, Community and Contestation in the Eastern Himalayas, initiated by Leiden University and Ashoka University. Her research is funded by NWO and the Delta on the Move Foundation)

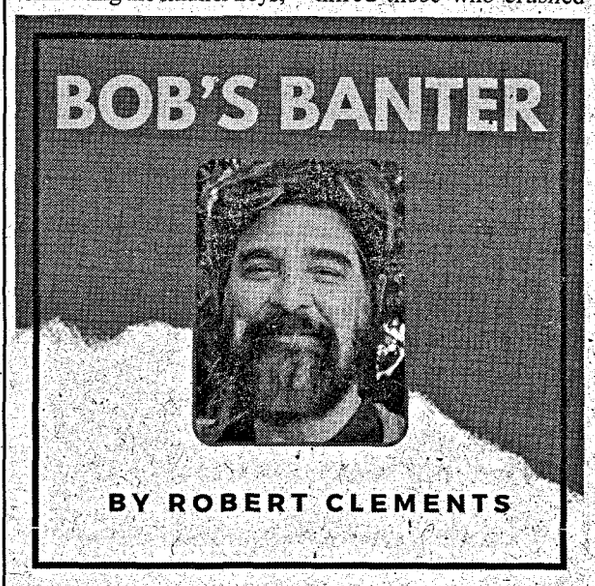
Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Bullied by the Bully!

I remember a boy in school who strutted around as if he owned the playground. He pinched smaller boys, hid their tiffin boxes, pushed them off the swings and generally behaved like the uncrowned king of the place. If there was a frightened child nearby, he would somehow find him. He seemed to possess an uncanny radar that detected weakness. There was no bravery in him, only arrogance disguised as courage.

Then one day, during an inter school sports meet, a giant of a fellow from another school wandered into the playground. He was not looking for trouble. He simply happened to be there. Suddenly our resident bully underwent a miraculous transformation. He disappeared faster than free samosas at a political rally. Not only did he stop tormenting the smaller boys,



but he smiled politely at everybody, offered to carry cricket bats and even began saying, "After you!"

Funny how bullies become saints when they meet a bigger bully. That memory returned to me as I read reports and claims emerging from our northern borders. According to today's newspaper, there are allegations that areas claimed by India, including places such as Oying, Paniar, Marpan, Potrang and Tindingdang, have slipped under Chinese control. Border villagers have expressed concern. Politicians, including Subramanian Swamy, have publicly questioned the government. Yet from those who usually thunder from every platform and television studio, there appears to be an unusual silence.

If these reports are true, why are we so quiet?

Before social media warriors sharpen their keyboards and accuse me of wanting war, let me make something absolutely clear. I have no desire for conflict. Wars are not fought by those who shout the loudest on television debates. They are fought by young soldiers who leave their mothers, wives and children behind. They are fought by families who receive folded flags instead of warm embraces. Nobody with even a grain of humanity wants war.

But surely there is something between waving a white flag and waving the national flag.

Surely there is room for clarity, confidence and conviction. Perhaps we are afraid. And if we are, I understand. China is no ordinary neighbour. It is an economic giant, a military giant and a geopolitical giant. Standing up to such a nation requires wisdom, preparation and immense courage.

Then a rather uncomfortable thought entered my head: Are we not behaving exactly the same way inside our own country?

How brave we become when dealing with minorities. How bold our speeches sound when those with less power are involved. How quickly laws are framed, slogans shouted and muscles flexed before communities that cannot easily answer back. How often women still walk our streets wondering whether they will return home safely. How easily those with little influence become targets for loud displays of authority.

Yet when faced with someone much larger than ourselves, suddenly the volume comes down.

It reminds me of a fellow in our neighbourhood who spent every morning chasing stray puppies away with a stick. He would roar, stamp his feet and proclaim himself the terror of the locality. Then one afternoon the neighbour's enormous German Shepherd wandered through the gate. Our fearless champion quietly stepped behind his wife and politely asked whether someone could kindly call the dog's owner.

Strength had suddenly become selective.

Unfortunately, that is often how bullies operate. They mistake vulnerability for victory. They confuse domination with leadership. They believe that frightening weaker people makes them powerful. It does not.

Real strength is tested only when you stand before someone stronger than yourself.

History has never admired those who crushed the weak. It has admired those who defended them. Look at the truly great leaders of the world. Whether or not one agreed with every policy they pursued, they understood that greatness is measured not merely by military hardware or economic statistics but by moral authority. A nation earns respect not because it can frighten its own citizens but because its citizens know they are safe in its hands.

That is where genuine patriotism begins.

Patriotism is not shouting the loudest slogan. It is ensuring that every citizen, irrespective of religion, caste, language, gender or economic status, feels equally protected under the same flag. When the weakest citizen sleeps peacefully, the nation itself sleeps peacefully.

A country that protects the weak develops a quiet confidence that no foreign power can easily shake. A nation that respects every community builds unity. A nation that honours its women earns dignity. A nation that values justice acquires something no army can manufacture.

Character: Character is invisible, yet it is stronger than steel.

Countries with character produce soldiers who fight not merely for territory but for values. Citizens stand together because they trust one another. The world respects them because they first learned to respect their own people.

Bullies never really possess strength. They merely borrow courage from somebody else's weakness. Remove the weaker victim and their confidence evaporates like morning mist.

That school bully eventually left our school. Years later I met one of his classmates who told me he had spent most of his adult life avoiding confrontation with anyone stronger than himself. Nothing had changed. The playground had simply become larger.

Perhaps nations too should occasionally look into the same mirror. Before asking why another country is bullying us, perhaps we should ask whether we have learned to stop bullying our own. Because a truly strong nation has no need to intimidate the powerless. It already possesses something infinitely greater: Character. And nations with character seldom remain bullied for very long...

(Do you want to author a book? Under the guidance of Robert Clements? Send a thumbsup to whatsapp no 9892572883 for details).

Letters to the Editor

Beyond the Uniform: A Cry for Consideration

Editor,

As I read Ludwig Van Beethoven's poem, "Whoever feels the joy of music, let him treasure it; but let him not make it his one aim," I'm reminded of the countless students who've lost touch with joy in school. Constant criticism and bullying by teachers can crush a child's spirit, making school feel like a prison instead of a safe haven. Beethoven's father repeatedly said, "NOT GOOD ENOUGH" - a phrase that still echoes in the minds of many students today.

A student was terrorized, insulted, and harassed for not wearing her uniform 'correctly' - a minor infraction that every other student was guilty of, but she was singled out. Mind you the skirt was two inches shorter than the desired length, a common neglect among students and parents found among growing youths. The question is, why did a teacher feel the need to nitpick so badly that the pupil begged her parents to leave school? Is a uniform more important than a child's dignity? Was this it or was there something more that made the student constantly raise complaints to the parents about shifting schools? Is this what the education system has come to? Or maybe the real source of pressure is coming from the head of the institution through the teachers?

I recall being humiliated for the way I spoke, walked, my hair colour, and even being ignored when I answered questions in class. I was cornered in a room, made to sit alone, and stood up for an entire period because the teacher was in a bad mood. My notebook was slashed with red ink, even when my answers were correct. The constant belittling made me dread school and fake being sick some days. One incident that still echoes is when a teacher shouted, "Your parents are raising a rebel through you," just because my hair didn't match the rest of my length. These experiences chipped away at my confidence, making me question my worth.

When COVID hit, and classes moved online, many teachers overlooked minor infractions like incomplete uniforms. But one teacher chose to insult the student so harsh as though talking to a criminal when classes resumed, leaving the mother in tears and counting days until the end of their period in the institution.

Emotional scars leave lasting marks on a child's psyche, shaping their mentality, maturity, and personality. Is this what educators want for their students - constant worry, anxiety, and fear? I wasn't the only one who suffered. Classmates were ridiculed for their accents, mocked for their mistakes, and punished for being different. We'd see teachers smile and praise the 'perfect' students, while those who struggled were left behind.

Institutions must prioritize students' well-being over reputation. You cannot use traditional methods of reprimanding the child constantly until they go numb. Teachers should nurture, not break, young minds. Times have changed. The time is now. Is it worth sacrificing a child's happiness for a school's reputation? Are we valuing grades over growth? What about the children who've lost their spark?

Teachers have the power to uplift or break. Instead of focusing on the 'perfect' students, what if they noticed the quiet ones, too? A little encouragement can spark a lifelong passion. Why not guide those who stumble, rather than belittle them?

We need a shift in how we perceive education. Schools should be spaces where children feel safe, valued, and encouraged to grow, not institutions that crush their spirit. It's time to ask: What are we teaching our children? Conformity or courage? Fear or curiosity? Yes, teachers are required to discipline when necessary, but is constant nitpicking justified? Picking on every little thing makes a child want to escape. Let's acknowledge it - this is a form of bullying, and it's not just between peers. The answer lies in empathy, patience, compassion, and a willingness to listen.

As a student I have gone through constant neglect by the teachers, when I just needed a little encouragement. My talents, my abilities, and skills, were boxed up in the closet drowning under all the others in the spotlight. Maybe if someone saw the struggle, pain, anxiety and aspiration of introverts instead of just focusing on the extroverts who exude confidence there would not have been ranks, tiers and jealousy among the peers.

Yours etc;
Name withheld on request
Via email

Sustainable Development & the Climate Impact of Conflict

Editor,

Sustainable Development is now one of the central concerns of the global community, especially in the face of climate change, environmental degradation, and armed conflict. Although industrial activity is widely recognized as a major source of pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, war also causes serious and often underestimated harm to the environment. Unlike regulated industrial sectors, armed conflict usually unfolds in conditions where environmental safeguards are weak, suspended, or unenforceable. As a result, war can intensify climate change, damage ecosystems, and undermine long-term development.

Armed conflict affects the environment in several ways. It destroys infrastructure, disrupts energy systems, contaminates water sources, damages agricultural land, and increases emissions through military operations and reconstruction activities. The Russia-Ukraine war has provided a clear example of how conflict can contribute to carbon emissions while also harming forests, soil, air quality, and public health. In this way, war does not only create humanitarian and economic crises; it also weakens environmental security and climate resilience.

At the international level, climate change has increasingly become a priority in global summits and policy discussions. Major economies are under pressure to reduce pollution through cleaner production, lower emissions, and stronger environmental regulation. "Sustainable development therefore requires cooperation among states through policy coordination, environmental commitments, and responsible trade relations". Importing goods that cannot be efficiently produced domestically, while exporting surplus goods through environmentally responsible systems, can support economic stability and reduce unnecessary pressure on local resources.

Energy transition is another essential part of sustainable development. Expanding cleaner power generation can reduce dependence on highly polluting practices such as charcoal use and unsustainable mining. This helps protect water resources, forests, agricultural land, and air quality. A modern and efficient power sector can also support industrial growth while lowering the environmental costs associated with traditional, carbon-intensive methods of production.

Trade policy also plays an important role in addressing climate change. When properly managed, import and export systems can promote greener production, improve resource efficiency, and facilitate access to cleaner technologies. In this sense, trade is not merely an economic instrument; it can also become a tool for environmental sustainability and climate mitigation.

The connection between war and environmental damage is increasingly supported by research. Studies on the Russia-Ukraine war have shown that armed conflict can produce substantial emissions and create toxic pollution risks. Research has also found that war can alter land surface temperature, air quality, and ecological stability in affected regions. These findings show that sustainable development must address not only industrial pollution, but also the environmental consequences of conflict.

In a nutshell, sustainable development cannot be achieved without considering both industrial emissions and the environmental effects of war. Climate change is driven not only by factories, transport, and energy use, but also by destruction, instability, and military conflict. Therefore, effective climate policy must integrate environmental regulation, cleaner energy systems, responsible trade, and peace-oriented development planning.

Yours etc.,
Johan Keenan Thabah,
Via email

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How family fitness sharpens the mind



Maintaining a consistent routine of physical exercise stands as one of the most vital actions any individual can take to safeguard their long-term health and vitality. Despite the well-documented benefits of staying active, a staggering number of people across the globe are failing to meet even the most basic movement requirements. Current global statistics paint a concerning picture of a sedentary society: approximately one in three adults do not meet the minimum recommended levels of physical activity. The situation is even more dire for the younger generation, as four out of every five children between the ages of 11 and 17 fall short of the recommended average of 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous activity per day. This widespread inactivity is not merely a matter of fitness; it is a burgeoning public health crisis.

The consequences of a sedentary lifestyle are far-reaching and profound. A chronic lack of physical movement significantly elevates the risk of developing debilitating long-term health conditions, most notably type 2 diabetes and various cardiovascular issues. However, the impact extends beyond physical ailments to the very way our brains function. Inactivity can negatively affect cognitive function—the essential mental processes that allow us to learn new information, retain memories, maintain concentration, and make informed decisions. For children, these cognitive skills are the bedrock of development; they are inextricably linked to educational achievement, school performance, and the breadth of opportunities available to them in their future professional lives.

For many, the transition into parenthood presents a unique set of challenges that can derail even the most committed fitness enthusiasts. Parents often find it exceptionally difficult to remain active while balancing the relentless demands of modern family life. The "time poverty" associated with raising children—juggling work, chores, and childcare—frequently leaves little to no room for personal exercise. Research suggests that the milestone of becoming a parent often leads to a measurable decline in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity. Because physical inactivity is a behavior that tends to affect both generations simultaneously, families have become a critical focal point for health interventions. By targeting the family unit as a whole, researchers hope to improve the collective health and wellbeing of both parents and their children.

Exploring obstacles and sources of inspiration

In our pursuit to understand these dynamics more deeply, we recently conducted a qualitative research study involving interviews with 24 different families. Our goal was to explore the specific factors that either help or hinder a family's ability to stay active and to see if these experiences varied based on a family's socioeconomic background.

Many of the barriers we uncovered were expected, yet they remain significant hurdles for many households. Families frequently pointed to the high cost of organized sports and extracurricular activities as a major deterrent. Furthermore, a general lack of free time was cited as a primary obstacle preventing families from engaging in active play together. However, we did notice a divide based on economic standing. Families from less affluent backgrounds often described a frustrating lack of access to local sports and leisure facilities, whereas families from more affluent backgrounds tended to view their local infrastructure as a vital support system that helped them maintain their active lifestyles.

One of the most heartening findings of our interviews was the power of mutual inspiration within the home. Children consistently reported that seeing their parents being active served as a powerful motivator for them to join in and move their bodies. Interestingly, this influence was not a one-way street. Parents, particularly those from less affluent backgrounds, often described their children as their primary role models for health. They explained that their children's natural enthusiasm for movement and play acted as a catalyst, motivating the adults to overcome their own lethargy and become more active themselves.

These insights suggest that physical activity within a household is not just a top-down instruction from parent to child. Instead, it is a reciprocal relationship where family members can inspire one another, fostering positive, lifelong habits that benefit the entire family ecosystem.

Putting theory into practice: The tag rugby programme

Building upon the findings from our interviews, we developed a specialized, family-based physical activity program. The goal was to create a framework that allowed parents and children to exercise side-by-side in a way that felt like play rather than a chore. We specifically chose tag rugby as the core activity for this intervention. We selected this sport because it is inherently fun, highly adaptable to different skill levels, and, crucially, non-contact. These features make it an ideal inclusive activity where people of vastly different ages and physical abilities can participate safely and effectively together.

Once the program was established, we sought to determine if even a brief intervention could yield measurable results. We designed a study to see if a single 45-minute session of family tag rugby could produce immediate, short-term benefits for both physical health and cognitive performance.

Measuring benefits to brain, body

Sixteen families volunteered to participate in this specific phase of the study. The experiment was designed with two distinct scenarios for comparison. On one occasion, the families took part in a 45-minute tag-rugby session, which included a structured warm-up, various skill-building activities, and small-sided games. On a separate occasion, the same families participated in a control session that involved 45 minutes of seated rest, providing a baseline for comparison.

To gauge the impact on the brain, participants completed a series of computer-based tasks both before and after each session. These tasks were specifically designed to assess various aspects of cognitive function, such as working memory, sustained attention, and the speed of information processing. To gauge the impact on the body, we monitored how the participants responded to a standardised lunch provided after the sessions. By tracking their blood-sugar and insulin levels, we could see how their metabolism reacted to the physical exertion.

Insulin is a vital hormone responsible for helping the body regulate blood sugar levels. Our findings regarding the parents were particularly striking. Following the tag-rugby session, parents exhibited significantly lower insulin concentrations after eating their meal compared to their levels after the resting session. What makes this finding remarkable is that their blood-sugar levels remained similar in both scenarios. This indicates that after just 45 minutes of exercise, the parents' bodies became more efficient, managing their blood sugar effectively while requiring less insulin to do so.

The cognitive results were equally encouraging. We observed immediate short-term improvements in mental performance across both generations. Children showed a marked improvement in working-memory tasks right after the exercise session. Meanwhile, parents demonstrated enhanced information-processing skills immediately following the game, with these cognitive benefits persisting for up to 45 minutes after the activity had ended.

A starting point for future health

While these results are exciting, it is important to interpret them with a degree of caution. Our study focused on a relatively small group of 16 families and measured the physiological and mental effects of only a single bout of exercise. Because of this, we cannot yet say for certain whether these benefits would persist over the long term or if they would accumulate into even greater health gains if a family participated in such activities on a regular, weekly basis.

Nevertheless, these findings serve as a highly promising starting point for future research and public health policy. Whether we are a child learning in a classroom, an adult concentrating on complex tasks at work, or a parent managing the chaotic logistics of everyday family life, we rely heavily on our memory, attention, and information-processing abilities throughout the day. A form of exercise that families can enjoy together is inherently more sustainable than traditional exercise routines that place extra demands on the schedules of already overstretched parents.

Ultimately, our research suggests that family-based physical activity offers a practical, dual-purpose solution. It supports physical health and sharpens cognitive performance while simultaneously providing a rare opportunity for parents and children to bond through shared, enjoyable experiences. In a modern world where both adults and children are struggling to move enough, creating accessible, fun, and inclusive opportunities for families to get active together is a strategy that deserves much greater attention and investment. *(The Conversation)*

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi — **Sunday, JULY 5, 2026**

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon trine Sun on your solar return chart and it will give good results. People will be jealous of you, and this will be the cause of their problem. You will march on the road to success. New job/business opportunities will come to you. You will have monetary gains. Additional sources of income will be tapped. Your spouse/partner will understand your feelings and aspirations well. You will be full of energy. You will not be afraid to take on new responsibilities. You will have capacity and confidence to bring tasks to conclusion. You will be able to overtake others based on your self-confidence and capability. You will get the benefit of government plans. You will undertake to do some difficult work and even achieve some success in it.

'This week for you'

Aries : (March 21 - April 20) It is time to obtain lot of wealth and happiness. You will have monetary gains. Additional sources of income will be tapped. You will also have amazing bonds with your family members. There will be joy, cheer and lot of warmth in family ties. Loved one will respect and understand each other. You will excel in your work. Lovebirds will also have a wonderful time and enjoy each other's company. Your health will remain fine. You will also go on a business trip which will put you in an advantageous position. It is a brilliant time to meet your friends and other people. You will shoulder your responsibility well. But you will behave a little tough with some people at workplace.

Taurus : (April 21 - May 21) These are days to have lot of name and *fame*. Works will be done without any obstruction. You will be very ambitious and will also achieve your goals. Destiny will provide you with a lot of opportunities to grow in your life. You will be helped and supported by your well-wishers. You will be victorious in professional matters. You will also have success in financial matters. Your pending work will also be completed. You will also have to take a vital decision in a matter of great importance. You will seek opinion of your friends and act accordingly. The time is good; you will get marital happiness. The placement of planets will bring lot of success. It will increase your professional and personal capacity. You will be successful in removing all obstacles.

Gemini : (May 22 - June 21) You will be enjoying mental peace. Your partner will be a source of strength and guide you. He/she will understand your feelings and will take care of your interests. You will also establish contact with a person living far away. You will have financial gains. Your contact with influential person will deepen. It is an auspicious time for you. You may also get attracted to opposite sex easily. You can fall in love relations again. You will also get ample opportunities for employment. There is strong possibility of a promotion in your job. You will be happy that everything goes according to your plans. You will also enjoy change in weather. It is time to go for a picnic or to a luxury resort for fun and relaxation and take a short break.

Cancer : (June 22 - July 22) The time is good for completing your work. You will enhance your knowledge and skills. You will get a new job/business offer. The passage of time is favorable for you. People will take interest in your ideas. You will also explore new business contacts. Business/work related trips will keep you busy. You will get success in love affairs. You will also plan to buy new clothes, jewelry and other things. You will also remain occupied with domestic matters. Housewives should give time to themselves too and relax and enjoy. You will also remain busy with religious work. You will also help those people in need. Your advice will prove vital for some people.

Leo : (July 23 - August 23) It is time to come out of your make-belief world and face reality. Life is going to be challenging for you, and you need to push yourself up. From now onwards your graph will only go up if you keep on trying and don't give up. You need to limit your expenses and not spend money on wrong people. Right decisions taken at the appropriate time will be favorable for you. It is better to take advice from your faithful friends on matters of property. You will enjoy wonderful bonding with your mate. Peace and harmony will prevail in your home. You will feel a new energy and hope. Your children will listen to you. Your parents and siblings will be helpful to you. Your financial aspect will be strong. You will enjoy the changing climate. You will plan to go on a short trip with your family amidst natural surroundings. You will be happy and feel delighted.

Virgo : (August 24 - September 22) You will be blessed with a unique personality. People will agree with what you suggest. You will get success in your pursuits. You will not say yes to any proposal without giving it proper thought. You will not make friends easily. But once you are committed there is no going back. You will remain loyal to your friends. You will not look for short-term gains. You will purchase some property or vehicle. It is difficult for people to understand what goes inside their mind. You will be successful in love affairs. You will also solve financial problems of your brothers. You will also meet a great and influential person.

Libra : (September 23 - October 23) These are excellent days. You will have financial gains. You will also explore additional sources of income. Your expenses too will rise. Your working atmosphere will be enjoyable, and you will keep working hand. Your behavior at home should be good. You will be free of tension. You will spend quality time with your family members. You will also fulfill your responsibilities. You will witness positive changes in your life. There are chances of change in jobs also. While on the one hand you will strive to be successful in your work and career, you will on the other hand also want to fulfill your domestic responsibilities too. People would like to work with you and support you too.

Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22) The time is entirely favorable for you. You will get opportunities to rise in your life. New job/business offers will come to you. You will also remain in the pink of your health. You will try to go for multi-tasking way. it will be better for you to follow the middle path. There is no need to take the risks and just move onwards with the passage of time. You will be hopeful. You will be clear in your mind and decisive too. You will have absolutely no doubts. Before going to start anything new, you will think twice and take the advice of seniors. You will feel energetic. You will enjoy marital bliss. A pilgrimage might be planned.

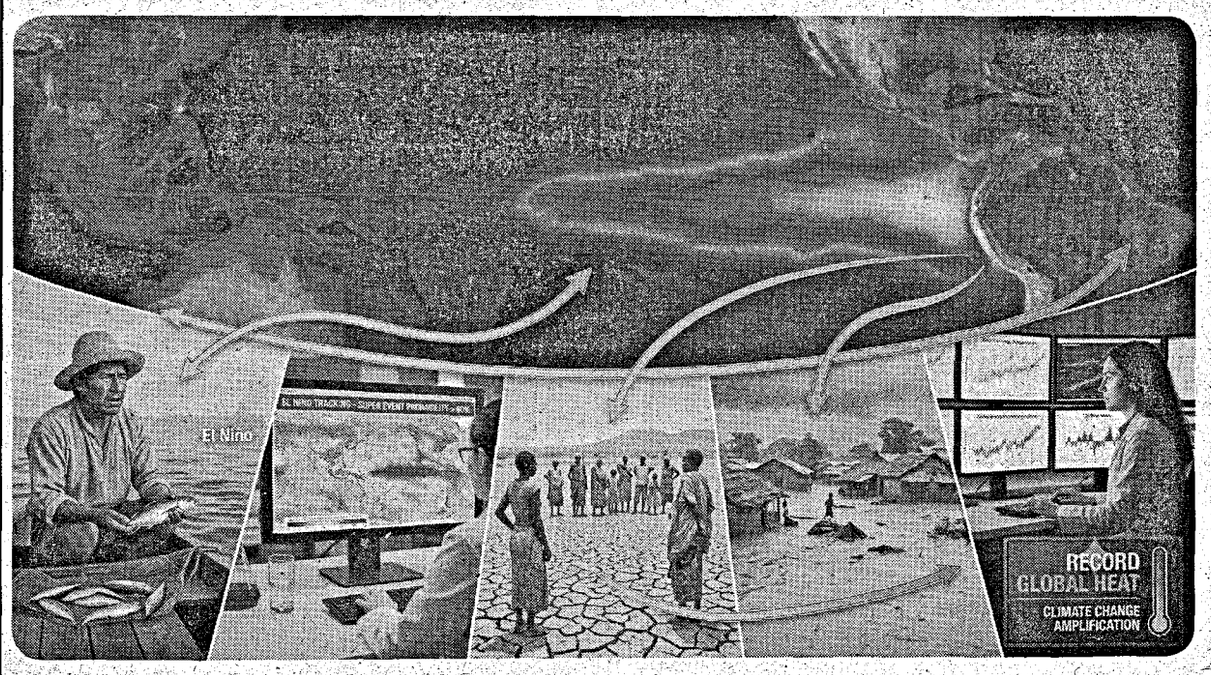
Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21) There will be an increase in your dignity and prestige. Your work will be completed according to your wishes. New job/business offers will come to you. In the field of education, students will maintain their performance and do well. You will develop interest in yoga, meditation, prayers and reading motivational literature. You will also look after your elders and get their blessings. You will have financial gains. Money inflow will be continuous. You will get some new ideas that will prove successful. Your behavior towards everyone will be good and you will achieve fame. You will also make changes in your office and house. You will also make some important decisions in order to do something new in business. You need to control your expenses.

Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20) These are days for doing hard work and getting the best results. You will be happy, healthy and cheerful. Your charming and immaculate personality will impress and attract one and all. But that will not worry you too much. You will also spend quality time with your family. Joy and bliss will fill your home. You will come close to your loved ones. Guests will visit and you will be very busy with them. You will also be able to do some important work. There will be some obstacles in government related work, but you will be able to remove it. You will face all your difficulties with determination and will not be discouraged by difficult situations. You will enjoy the fascinating journey of your life. This will take you far in life.

Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18) It is a wonderful phase for you. Positive incidents will take place. Something will leave a lasting impression on your mind. There will be an increase in income. You will feel very happy meeting people. You need to pay attention to your health. Your time will be spent on useful activities. Your business will never be sort of funds. Government officials will get additional income by doing extra work. Your parents will pour a lot of love upon you. Your spouse will understand you very well. There will be an increase in your self-respect. You will return to work with lot of zest and zeal. You will get success in money matters. With this success you will be encouraged to renovate, beautify and decorate your home.

Pisces : (February 19 - March 20) These are prestige enhancing days. You will be having love for loved ones, which will give them happiness. You will also get your work done. Your children will shine in their field. You will feel very relaxed. The time is beneficial. Travels will be relaxing. You also need to control your eating habits and take care of your health. You will also make plans for acquiring land, property etc. The road to financial progress will open. Sources of income will increase. You will also show love towards your in-laws and will establish good relations with them. You will be happy obtaining something and securing gains. You will pay full attention to your work. There will be an increase in your popularity. Your attitude of looking at world will change.

Evolution of a Super El Niño



The global climate community is on high alert as El Niño has officially commenced. Meteorological experts are currently projecting a significant probability—exceeding 60%—that this naturally occurring phenomenon will intensify into a "very strong" or "super" El Niño as we move later into 2026.

While El Niño is a recurring part of Earth's climate system, the transition from a standard event to a "super" event carries profound implications for the entire planet.

At its core, El Niño is characterized by an unusual warming of surface waters in the central and eastern Pacific Ocean near the equator. This localized change in ocean temperature acts as the first domino in a global cascade, triggering dramatic shifts in atmospheric circulation.

These shifts, known as teleconnections, can disrupt weather patterns thousands of miles away, translating high Pacific temperatures into a chaotic mix of severe floods, prolonged droughts, and intensified storm systems across different continents.

To better understand this complex chain of events, The Conversation Weekly podcast recently featured Ioana Colfescu, a distinguished expert in climate science and machine learning from the University of St Andrews and the University of Edinburgh. Colfescu provides a deep dive into the mechanics of El Niño, explaining how researchers utilise advanced data to predict what these shifts mean for the global population.

The history of El Niño stretches back centuries, long before modern satellite tracking. In the early 1600s, coastal fishermen in Peru and Ecuador were the first to document the anomaly.

Their livelihoods depended on the cold, nutrient-rich waters of the Pacific, which were typically flush with anchovies. However, they noticed that every few years, the ocean would turn uncharacteristically warm, causing the anchovy populations to vanish. Because these peak warming periods often coincided with the holiday season, they named the phenomenon "El Niño"—Spanish for "the little boy" or "the Christ child."

In the centuries following those early observations, science has transformed our understanding of the event. We now recognise this warming as a critical phase of a natural cycle known as the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO).

Modern scientists are constantly refining their models to predict not just when the next El Niño will arrive, but how severe its global footprint will be.

According to Colfescu, current indicators suggest this upcoming El Niño shares a similar trajectory and signature with previous "super" El Niños. However, she notes a crucial distinction: while the "temperature index" may confirm a massive event in terms of raw heat, that doesn't always provide a perfect blueprint for its physical impact. "While we know it's gonna be a big event in terms of temperature," Colfescu explains, "this temperature index is not yet defined as a big event in terms of impact."

Looking back at the 2023-24 El Niño provides a clear example of this complexity. That event ranked among the top five strongest ever recorded and contributed significantly to 2024 becoming the hottest year in history.

It fueled devastating floods in regions like Brazil, yet some other predicted weather disasters failed to materialize. Colfescu points out that El Niño's impacts are often "nuanced," as the atmosphere's response can vary wildly between the tropics and regions further toward the poles.

Ultimately, the most concerning factor in modern El Niños is the influence of human-induced climate change. Colfescu warns that whatever severe weather occurs will likely be amplified. Because the oceans have already absorbed massive amounts of heat due to global warming, today's El Niño is essentially "overlapped" on an already record-warm baseline, making the potential for "super" status and extreme weather even more precarious. *(The Conversation)*

"All things must come to the soul from its roots, from where it is planted."

—Saint Teresa of Avila

The Shillong Times

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Teesta and more

BANGLADESH would not have been born but for the timely help that India provided by way of material, moral and military assistance to the Mukti Bahini of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, when his liberation struggle faced brutal repression from the Pakistani military rulers there. Now a nation of nearly 18 crore, Bangladesh is the world's eighth populous nation that progressively strengthened its economy through the visionary leadership of successive governments, most notably of the now exiled Sheikh Hasina. Currently in exile in an undisclosed destination, facing a death warrant back home, and her Awami League party banned, she remains unruffled. Hasina has expressed optimism that she would return to Bangladesh before the year-end. Clearly, the present BNP dispensation appears to be on a weak footing with Tarique Rahman the current prime minister increasingly swinging on what looks like a trapeze act, evident also from his recent visit to China.

Breaking a long tradition of the elected prime ministers from Bangladesh making India the choice destination for their first overseas visit, Rahman chose to fly to China, sup with the red edifice there and signing pacts. A customary joint declaration at the end of the visit signalled Chinese support for Bangladesh in the management of the Teesta river. Sharing of Teesta waters had been under discussion between India and Bangladesh for the past few years, which however got stuck with resistance from Mamata Banerjee as West Bengal chief minister. Defeated in the recent assembly polls, Banerjee is now counselling patience to her Trinamool Congress rank and file. She wants them to stop the resistance to the central government's negotiations with Bangladesh in the water-sharing dispute. Better sense should have prevailed upon her while she was the CM.

Rahman is facing serious odds even as his government is just months-old. Islamic entities with indirect backing from Pakistan are seeking to put spokes in the wheels of governance and allegedly pressing on the present dispensation for stronger anti-India stance and anti-(Hindu) minority move. Hasina says the last elections won by the BNP were stage-managed while her banned party had not been allowed to contest. She also stressed, "there's no democracy, no rule of law, no security for the people now." Rahman had at the outset, when he returned from his long foreign sojourn to take charge of the nation, stated clearly that his government's foreign policy would be guided solely by the interests of the nation. Yet, by openly distancing himself from India and instead courting China, he has demonstrated both his inclinations and the domestic compulsions that bind his hands. Bangladesh, under an interim government guided by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus had distanced itself from India. Yunus chose to ignore the decades' strong support that India extended to Bangladesh in multiple sectors, and more strongly under Sheikh Hasina's five terms in power as Prime Minister. India, on its part, cannot remain a silent spectator to Chinese meddling in regional affairs. If Bangladesh opts to engage China, it would also open the door for Pakistan to step in and play its games in what was once East Pakistan.

Farmers Crying Over a Loan the Government of Meghalaya Called Progress

By Napoleon S Mawphniang

There's a particular kind of cruelty — quiet, bureaucratic, almost elegant in its indifference — that doesn't announce itself with the blunt instrument of a bad law or the loud violence of a riot. It reveals itself instead in the architecture of a government scheme. A scheme wrapped in the language of promise. Dressed in the vocabulary of progress. Yet constructed in such a way that when it collapses, it's always the farmer who stands beneath the rubble. Not the bureaucrat who signed the file. Not the department head who attended the launch ceremony. The farmer.

I think about this often. I think about it because I've met them — pig farmers from various villages of Meghalaya that never make it into press releases. People who looked at the Meghalaya Piggery Mission loan — roughly Rs 15 to 20 lakhs disbursed through the Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Department via the Meghalaya Livestock Enterprises Advancement Society, or M-LEADS — and saw, for the first time in a long while, a door opening. When the Federation of Piggery Farmers of Meghalaya (FPFM) - I've been working with was formally established on March 21, 2026, bringing together nearly 400 affected farmers and 25 cooperative societies, the stories we began collecting were not easy to carry.

So let me begin with a question — and I ask it in the spirit of Socrates, not as a rhetorical flourish, but as a genuine demand for clarity: what does the word "mission" actually mean? Wittgenstein would press us here. He'd insist we look at the word not in abstract isolation but in the language-game in which it is being played. A "mission" implies purpose, accountability, follow-through. But what accountability exists when the Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Department's official webpage hasn't been substantively updated since January 2018? As one documented analysis bluntly recorded, we face an "accountability void" — seven years of silence where public data on the Piggery Mission's outcomes ought to be. Seven years. No annual progress reports. No production data. Nothing to show.

The mission was conceived with great ambition. Launched in FY 2021 and funded by the National Cooperative Development Corporation (NCDC), the Piggery Mission document— still available on megahvt.gov.in—describes plans for 2,513 nuclear breeding units, 21,359 fattening units, and 23 state-of-the-art slaughterhouses, with one for every two blocks in the state. Reading it feels like examining a manifesto for a revolution that was never organized. It's reminiscent of Prometheus bringing fire, but no one has built the altar to ensure its safe use.

In 2022 and 2023, hundreds of farmers from cooperative societies enrolled under this mission borrowed between Rs 15 lakh and Rs 20 lakh. They signed papers, purchased stock, and made plans. Then, the African Swine Fever (ASF) struck. It is important to understand the severity of ASF; it is a hemorrhagic viral disease for which there is no treatment and no vaccine, as explicitly stated in the advisory from the Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Department. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) confirmed multiple resurgences of the outbreak across Meghalaya in 2026, with Ri Bhoi being one of the most severely affected districts. Between 2022 and 2023, the disease devastated pig herds across Northeast India, resulting in what researchers from the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) later characterized as "disproportionate losses for smallholder and tribal farmers." Pigs died, and the investments vanished overnight.

> ***"The Federation has requested a complete waiver of all Piggery Mission loans, a non-refundable relief grant of ₹10 lakh for each affected farmer, and the implementation of a "Buy Meghalaya Pork" policy. When we met with Animal Husbandry Minister Sanbor Shullai in May 2026, he assured us that the matter would be discussed the following month."***

Here is where Kafka enters the room. Because what followed is something only bureaucratic nightmare can produce. The pigs were gone. The livelihood was gone. But the loan wasn't. Banks — doing precisely what banks are structurally designed to do — began knocking on doors. The mission document had promised zero-percent interest, but only within a fixed repayment window; cross that window and interest begins accumulating automatically. Farmers with no pigs and no income were now facing compounding debt. Speaking to the press in Shillong in May 2026, I described it this way: "Many thought that the loan was a blessing but when African swine flu hit, many of them were victims of the loan itself. The pigs are gone and the banks are knocking on the door demanding from them to pay back the loan." (Meghalaya Daily, May 26, 2026). Some went into depression. That's not a metaphor. That's a clinical reality.

So where was the Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Department when ASF was tearing through these farms? The department's own documentation concedes that veterinary manpower is "much less than required," that diagnostic facilities "need strengthening," that vaccine quality control is inadequate, and quarantine infrastructure remains weak. The department said this to itself, in its own reports. Knowing all of this — knowing there was neither treatment nor vaccine for ASF, knowing their veterinary capacity was threadbare — why did they disburse loans to cooperative farmers and call it a mission? That question deserves not a press conference but a public reckoning.

This situation exemplifies the Freirean trap in its most precise form. Isn't this exactly what we are witnessing? The Piggery Mission didn't empower the farmers; it instead indebted them. It provided them with a semblance of enterprise without supplying the essential infrastructure needed for success— namely, disease prevention, a veterinary safety net, and market protections—that would make their enterprises viable.

Additionally, there's the market problem, which is nearly as detrimental as the issue of disease. Our federation's memorandum, submitted in May 2026 to Governor C.H. Vijayashankar, Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma, and Animal Husbandry Minister Sanbor Shullai, has documented what local farmers have been saying for years: the unregulated influx of pigs from Assam, Punjab, and Delhi is driving down local prices.. A Meghalaya-raised pig takes one-and-a-half years to reach market weight. A commercially bred pig from outside takes four to six months. The economics are brutal. Local farmers simply cannot compete. And yet no border regulation exists. No "Buy Meghalaya Pork" policy. Nothing resembling a serious protective response. Chomsky called this manufactured consent — the engineering of conditions that appear normal while systematically favouring entrenched interests over the vulnerable.

The so-called "insurance" built into the mission? Farmers tell me it wasn't real insurance. It was a contribution extracted from their own pockets, and it didn't cover ASF losses. Not a single rupee in compensation has been paid by the government for pig deaths caused by African Swine Fever, as confirmed by the federation's representations. The Shillong Times reported on the federation's demands in May 2026, yet formal government compensation notifications remain conspicuously absent.

Ambedkar — who understood better than almost anyone what debt does to a community — wrote that economic bondage was inseparable from social subjugation. He'd have recognised this story immediately. In Greek myth, Tantalus stood in a pool beneath heavy fruit trees, both water and fruit eternally receding at the moment of reach. That's not drama. That's a precise description of what the Piggery Mission has been for its beneficiaries: the promise always visible, the substance — veterinary infrastructure, market protection, genuine insurance, compensatory relief — always just out of reach.

The Federation has requested a complete waiver of all Piggery Mission loans, a non-refundable relief grant of ₹10 lakh for each affected farmer, and the implementation of a "Buy Meghalaya Pork" policy. When we met with Animal Husbandry Minister Sanbor Shullai in May 2026, he assured us that the matter would be discussed the following month. However, we shall see if that happens. In Indian governance, "next month" often seems to last indefinitely. After all, the Livestock Mission webpage has been pending since 2018.

René Girard wrote of the scapegoat — the structural mechanism through which a community deflects its own failures onto its most vulnerable member. In this story, the pig farmer is the scapegoat. They carried the risk. They signed the papers. They buried the pigs. They now carry the debt. The Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Department of Meghalaya must answer — not in the language of another beautifully written mission document, but in the currency of actual relief, actual accountability, and actual justice. Not next month. Now.

(The writer is an Advocate and a concerned citizen from Ri Bhoi District, Meghalaya. He serves as Secretary of the Federation of Piggery Farmers of Meghalaya and writes in his personal capacity.)

Consumer Choice & Local Enterprise: Finding the Right Balance for Meghalaya

By Shakeel Rafee Swer

The debate over whether quick-commerce platforms should be allowed to operate in Meghalaya extends far beyond grocery deliveries. It presents a fundamental question that policymakers across the world have faced: Should public policy primarily shield existing businesses from competition, or should it promote competition that ultimately benefits the wider public?

The answer is rarely black and white. Local retailers are an integral part of Meghalaya's economy. They generate employment, support families, and contribute to the social fabric of every neighbourhood. Their concerns about increased competition deserve careful consideration. However, public policy must also recognise another equally important stakeholder—the consumer.

In Shillong, thousands of retail establishments serve a population that runs into several lakhs, including residents, students, government employees, tourists, and daily commuters. Every household is a consumer. Every family purchases groceries, medicines, household essentials, and other necessities. While the interests of retailers are significant, the interests of consumers are far broader in scale. Policies affecting the marketplace must therefore strike a balance between protecting livelihoods and safeguarding the rights of the much larger population that depends on affordable goods, quality service, and greater choice.

Economic history consistently demonstrates that competition is not the enemy of local enterprise. Rather, it is one of the most powerful drivers of innovation, efficiency, and long-term growth. Businesses facing healthy competition often improve customer service, adopt new technologies, diversify their offerings, and become more responsive to changing consumer needs. Consumers, in turn, benefit from lower prices, improved quality, and greater convenience.

The experiences of several countries reinforce this principle.

In the United States, the rapid expansion of e-commerce was initially viewed as an existential threat to neighbourhood stores. While some businesses struggled, many others reinvented themselves by specialising in unique products, strengthening customer relationships, and integrating online and offline services. Independent retailers continue to thrive today because they adapted rather than resisted change.

The United Kingdom witnessed similar concerns as online shopping transformed consumer behaviour. Instead of attempting to halt technological progress, policymakers encouraged traditional businesses to modernise through digital marketing, click-and-collect services, and improved customer experiences. Many local enterprises not only survived but discovered new avenues for growth.

China offers perhaps the most striking example. The rise of digital commerce did not simply create large online companies; it also enabled millions of small merchants to reach customers well beyond their local communities. Technology became an enabler for local entrepreneurship rather than its replacement.

India's own experience provides perhaps the most relevant lesson. When national e-commerce platforms entered the market, many feared the decline of traditional retail. Yet local markets across the country continue to flourish because they offer immediate availability, trusted relationships, personalised service, and products suited to local preferences. At the same time, many retailers have embraced digital payments, online ordering, and home delivery, demonstrating that adaptation—not isolation—is the key to resilience.

Shillong has already witnessed this transformation. Despite the growth of online shopping over the past decade, its traditional commercial centres remain vibrant and continue to attract thousands of customers every day. Rather than disappearing, many businesses have evolved to meet changing consumer expectations.

This illustrates an important economic principle: competition does not necessarily eliminate local enterprise; it often compels businesses to become stronger and more innovative.

Consumers also deserve equal consideration in this debate. At a time when the cost of living continues to rise, every rupee saved on household essentials matters. If increased competition enables families to purchase quality products at lower prices, those savings directly improve household welfare. Public policy should not overlook the interests of the overwhelming majority of consumers while seeking to protect a comparatively smaller segment of market participants.

This does not imply that local businesses should be left to compete without support. On the contrary, governments have a crucial role in creating a level playing field. Around the world, successful jurisdictions have adopted balanced regulatory frameworks that require digital platforms to comply with taxation, labour standards, consumer protection laws, and fair competition rules. Where concerns about predatory pricing or unfair market practices arise, regulators intervene through oversight—not blanket prohibition. Simultaneously, local enterprises receive support through easier access to finance, digital infrastructure, training, and technology adoption.

Such an approach acknowledges an important reality: innovation is inevitable, but fairness is a matter of public policy.

For Meghalaya, the challenge is not whether technology will reshape commerce—it already has. The real challenge is determining how the State can prepare its businesses to compete successfully while ensuring that consumers enjoy the benefits of innovation. Protecting local enterprise and promoting consumer welfare need not be mutually exclusive objectives.

A resilient economy is one that embraces change while ensuring that no stakeholder is left behind. Restricting competition may provide temporary reassurance, but it seldom builds long-term competitiveness. Supporting businesses to modernise, innovate, and compete creates stronger enterprises and a healthier marketplace.

Ultimately, the purpose of economic policy is to serve the public interest. In a city where the number of consumers vastly exceeds the number of enterprises, public decisions must weigh the welfare of the many alongside the legitimate concerns of the few. The goal should not be to choose between consumers and businesses, but to create an environment where both prosper.

In the end, this is not a debate about apps or algorithms. It is a debate about whether Meghalaya trusts its own people to make their own choices in the marketplace. Consumer choice, fair competition, and a strong local trading community are not rival claims on policymakers' attention — they are three parts of the same promise: that progress need not come at the cost of belonging. Shillong does not have to choose between its shopkeepers and its shoppers. It has to choose whether to lead this transition on its own terms, or let fear write the policy instead.

Letters to the Editor

Why Use Teachers for Election-Related Work

Editor,

The repeated absence of government school teachers from classrooms due to their deployment in Census operations, SIR duties, and prolonged election responsibilities result in the loss of vital academic hours. This practice deprives students of their fundamental right to education under Article 21A of the Constitution of India. Why must the administrative convenience of the State come at a cost borne by children?

Does this situation not also violate the right to equality under Article 14? While private school students receive uninterrupted teaching, government school students repeatedly lose instructional time because their teachers are requisitioned for state functions. Teaching has thus been reduced to a secondary function for government teachers.

If the state continues to compromise education, the very foundation of equality and justice will be weakened. Governments must therefore, evolve alternative administrative mechanisms, including the creation of dedicated Census and Election Cadres, so that the classroom remains the teacher's primary place of duty and children's education is never sacrificed at the altar of administrative expediency.

Yours etc.,
D. Bhattacharjee,
Shillong-1

Mistreatment of Toddlers at Day Care Centre

Editor,

The recent reports about the alleged mistreatment of toddlers at a Day Care centre inside the Capgemini campus in Bengaluru have understandably left many parents worried and disturbed. According to media reports, videos showing the alleged abuse led to a police investigation and the filing of a case. While the truth will come out through due legal process, the incident has once again reminded us how important it is to ensure the safety of children in daycare centres.

Sadly, this is not an isolated concern. Similar incidents have been reported in the past as well. The Times of India covered the Bengaluru case on 2 July 2026, while Hindustan Times highlighted the anxiety among parents following the incident on the same day. Earlier, NDTV reported an alleged assault on a toddler at a daycare centre in Noida based on CCTV footage on 11 August 2025. Even if the final outcomes of such cases vary, they serve as a wake-up call that child safety in daycare facilities needs constant attention and improvement.

This issue is especially important for thousands of working parents from the North-East. Every year, many young people from Meghalaya, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Sikkim move to metropolitan cities in search of better employment opportunities. With both parents often working, daycare centres become a crucial support system for their young children.

When choosing a daycare, parents should not focus only on convenience or cost. They should ensure that the centre is properly licensed, that caregivers are trained and police-verified, and that there is a safe caregiver-to-child ratio. Clean and child-friendly facilities, proper first-aid and emergency arrangements, fire safety measures, secure entry and exit systems, and functioning CCTV cameras are all essential. Wherever possible, daycare centres should also provide parents with secure live access to CCTV feeds on their mobile phones during daycare hours. Such transparency can help build trust and offer parents greater peace of mind. Talking to other parents and learning about their experiences can also help in making an informed decision.

At the same time, there is a need for stronger and more consistent regulations from the Government. Regular inspections, proper staff training, effective child protection systems, and strict compliance with safety standards should be made mandatory. Companies that run daycare centres within their campuses must also take full responsibility to ensure that these facilities meet the highest standards of safety, transparency and care.

Parents should be able to go to work with peace of mind, knowing that their children are safe, secure and well cared for. Creating a trustworthy and child-friendly daycare system is not just important for working families—it is an investment in the well-being of the next generation.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj
Via email

The El Nino Effect

Editor,

The delayed monsoon in India has adversely affected the timely sowing of rice and other crops. An uncertain monsoon has far reaching consequences such as low agricultural production, reduced rural income and so on. Given that agriculture supports nearly half of India's workforce, volatile rainfall will badly affect their lives. As erratic rainfall and climate change have an enormous impact on agriculture, we need to shift to a new agricultural policy. We cannot afford to confine to usual measures such as procurement, minimum support price and emergency relief. We need to adapt to deficit rainfall and climate change. Improved irrigation, rainwater harvesting, drought -resistant crops, improved weather forecasting, diversity of crops etc., must be given importance. Cultivation that needs excessive groundwater extraction must be discouraged. The government has recognised the importance of contingency planning for agricultural areas with deficient rainfall, hence it must lay emphasis on adaptation in its policy. We need an agricultural system that can withstand uncertain rainfall.

Yours etc.,
Venu GS,
Kollam

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"All good things which exist are the fruits of originality."

— John Stuart Mill

The Shillong Times

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Women and Sexual Abuse

THE goings-on in the Meghalaya Cricket Association (MCA) where women players were sexually exploited by a section of male members of the Association and which the State Commission for Women took very seriously, deserve discussion by women's groups across the state. In a matrilineal society it is expected that women would rise to the occasion and condemn in the most explicit terms such acts that violate the sanctity of the woman's body. Imagine enlisting for a game out of the sheer aspiration to play it to the best of their ability, only to be hampered by such ignoble acts from those who are supposed to be guiding and coaching them to put their best foot forward; this is disgraceful to say the least. The silence from women's organisations across the state and the lack of condemnation of these and other cases of sexual assaults is worrying. Where are the women's rights organizations that used to be vocal in condemning all manner of crimes against women? Or have they decided to turn a blind eye to such assaults on womanhood?

However, women's organisations alone cannot be blamed. What has affected the women cricketers affects every woman. While some parents have spoken on behalf of their children, that is not enough. The entire society must stand united to call out this ignominious act and its perpetrators. In fact the office bearers of the MCA who failed to bring the emails written by the sexually harassed women cricketers to the notice of the concerned authorities deserve equal punishment under the Prevention of Sexual Harassment Act. It is a criminal act to suppress a complaint made by the women cricketers. It is hoped that the State Commission for Women would also help provide counselling and confidence building from trained counselors to address their hurt and pain; otherwise, they may go into depression, which would affect their budding cricketing careers.

Then we have the latest account of a young man from Mizoram – a former resident of Shillong who allegedly sexually molested or raped some young women here in Meghalaya. The victims of such exploitation are naturally hesitant to lodge a complaint since the perpetrator allegedly threatened to release videos of their sexual escapades on social media. The State Police taking suo-moto action and lodging an FIR against the perpetrator is a step in the right direction. However, only a few cases have come to light. On a daily basis, women, young and not so young suffer all manner of abuse from their husbands or partners and take it in their stride because they have internalized the notion that anything that happens between a couple is a private affair that should remain confined to the bedroom. But the POSH Act that came about after the infamous Nirbhaiya rape case in Delhi was crafted by the like of Justice JS Verma a legal luminary to protect women from such horrific acts. Sexual abuse often leaves survivors feeling isolated. Sharing what happened with someone trustworthy can provide emotional support and practical help. Sexual abuse can have long-lasting psychological effects, including anxiety, depression, guilt, fear, sleep problems, or symptoms of trauma. Speaking with a trained mental health professional or joining a support group can help. The problem is that such peer support groups are not visible in Meghalaya. There is need for more active women's organisations to take on the mantle of speaking on behalf of the less empowered and abused women.

Neolissochilus pnar: The Pride of Meghalaya

By H.H. Mohrmen

Meghalaya is renowned not only for its breathtaking landscapes but also for its extraordinary underground world. Its heavy rainfall and vast limestone deposits have, over millions of years, created one of the largest and most spectacular cave systems in India, earning it the title of the "Caving Capital of India." These caves are home to a remarkable diversity of rare and endemic species, including Neolissochilus pnar, the world's largest known subterranean fish. Together, they make Meghalaya a globally important centre for cave biodiversity and scientific research.

These cave systems have become a source of pride for the state, as the study and exploration of caves in Meghalaya have attracted scientists, geologists, and cave explorers from around the world.

Formation of Caves in Meghalaya

Most caves in Meghalaya are formed through a natural process known as karst formation. Karst topography develops when rainwater, which is slightly acidic, dissolves soluble rocks such as limestone over thousands of years. This process creates underground channels, tunnels, chambers, sinkholes, and caves. Most of these caves are limestone caves, and they occur in areas that have large deposits of limestone.

Meghalaya's heavy rainfall accelerates this process. Water seeps through cracks in limestone rocks, gradually widening them into large underground passages. Over time, these passages become extensive cave systems. While most caves in Meghalaya are limestone caves, some are formed in sandstone, which is rare and scientifically important. While one can find many sandstone caves in the state, the most remarkable example is Krem Puri, which is recognised as the longest sandstone cave in the world, stretching over 25 kilometres.

Exploration of Caves in Meghalaya

Although local communities have known about many caves for centuries, scientific exploration began only in the late twentieth century. In 1992, a small team of European cave explorers visited Meghalaya and recognised the enormous potential for cave exploration in the Khasi, Jaiñtia, and Garo Hills.

In 1994, they partnered with the Meghalaya Adventurers' Association, led by Brian D. Kharpran Daly and Donbok Syiemlieh. This partnership launched the project known as Caving in the Abode of the Clouds, which has continued for more than three decades. Through this collaboration, approximately 1,700 caves have been recorded in Meghalaya, and over 1,000 have been explored or partially mapped. These discoveries have placed Meghalaya on the global map of cave exploration.

These many expeditions have also helped establish the fact that most of the longest and deepest caves in the Indian subcontinent are found in Meghalaya.

Importance of Caves

The caves of Meghalaya are important for several reasons. They preserve evidence of Earth's geological history and help scientists understand climate change and environmental changes over thousands of years. They are home to many rare and endangered species, some of which are endemic to the region and therefore contribute significantly to biodiversity conservation. Caves also attract tourists, researchers, and adventurers, which support the local economy and create employment opportunities. Additionally, the caves are an important part of Meghalaya's natural heritage and must be protected for future generations.

Dr. Khlur Baiaineh Mukhim, one of the experts in the study of cave fishes in East Jaiñtia Hills, said, "Caves like Krem Liatprah Um-im-labit are a factory of time-taking speciation, where new species are being formed over millions of years. If the Shillong Plateau (including both Jaiñtia and Garo Hills) was raised some 50 million years ago from the Tethys Sea, nature could have taken at least 5–10 million years to create such extensive caves of great magnificence that are often visited with a sense of respect, wonder, and awe! These are humongous natural assets (belonging to our past ancestors, to us today, and to many future generations of our children, grandchildren, and their children) that have to be responsibly respected."

The Meghalayan Age

In 2018, the International Commission on Stratigraphy officially named the present geological age the Meghalayan Age. This was based on scientific evidence collected from a stalagmite found in Mawmluh Cave. This discovery gave Meghalaya international recognition and highlighted the scientific importance of its caves.

Biodiversity in Meghalaya's Caves

Although caves appear dark and lifeless, they support a rich and unique ecosystem. Many animals have adapted to survive in these dark and isolated environments. The caves of Meghalaya provide shelter to more than eleven species of bats. These include the Greater Large-eared Horseshoe Bat, Pomona Leaf-nosed Bat, and Eastern Bent-winged Bat. One of the rarest species found here is Wroughton's Free-tailed Bat, and Meghalaya is believed to hold more than half of the world's known population of this species.

Animals that live in caves are called troglofauna (from the Greek trogle, meaning "hole"). They are divided into three groups based on their dependence on caves. The first group is called trogloxenes. These animals use caves temporarily for shelter or breeding but do not spend their entire lives there. Bats are a common example.

The second group is troglophiles. These animals prefer living in caves but can also survive outside them. Examples include certain frogs, spiders, and insects. The third group is troglobites, which are true cave animals. They are fully adapted to cave life and cannot survive outside caves. They often have pale bodies, reduced eyes or no eyes, and enhanced senses of touch and smell.

Neolissochilus pnar and Other Cave Fish

The caves also contain rare fish species adapted to life in darkness. Among these rare species are Schistura larketensis, Schistura papulifera, and Neolissochilus pnar, discovered in East Jaiñtia Hills. These animals have reduced eyesight or no eyesight at all, as vision is not necessary in total darkness.Scientific information about Neolissochilus pnar was first published in Vertebrate Zoology 73:141–152 on February 6, 2023. The paper was co-authored by Neelesh Dahanukar, Department of Life Sciences, School of Natural Sciences, Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence, Delhi-NCR, India; Remya L. Sundar and Rajeev Raghavan, Department of Fisheries Resource Management, Kerala University of Fisheries and Ocean Studies (KUFOS), Kochi, India; Duwaki Rangad, Department of Zoology, St. Edmund's College, Laitumkhrah, Shillong, India; and Graham Proudlove, Department of Entomology, The Manchester Museum, University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom.

The world's largest subterranean fish was discovered in 2019 and was tentatively identified as a troglomorphic form of the golden mahseer, Tor putitora. Detailed analyses of its morphometric and meristic data, together with results from molecular analyses, revealed that it is a new species of the genus Neolissochilus, the sister taxon of Tor. The study formally described the new species as Neolissochilus pnar, honouring the tribal communities of East Jaiñtia Hills in Meghalaya, Northeast India, where it was discovered. Neolissochilus pnar possesses a number of characters unique among species of Neolissochilus, with the exception of the similarly subterranean N. subterraneus from Thailand. The unique characters that distinguish N. pnar from all epigean congeners include highly reduced eye size or the complete absence of externally visible eyes, complete lack of pigmentation, long maxillary barbels, long pectoral-fin rays, and a distinct scalation pattern.

The Endemic Fish Gets National Recognition

In the February 23, 2020, episode of Mann Ki Baat, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India shared fascinating facts about a rare fish species discovered by biologists in a cave in Meghalaya and remarked that it is the largest among the cave-dwelling species existing in deep underground caves where even light cannot reach. This recognition led the ministry to support the protection and conservation of this very unique fish species.

Later, the Central Government, through the Ministry of Fisheries, sanctioned Rs 1 crore to the department of Fisheries, Government of Meghalaya for the protection and conservation of Neolissochilus pnar in its only known habitat in East Jaiñtia Hills. With the funds now available, it is hoped that the government, through the Fisheries Department and with the support of the Meghalaya Adventurers' Association, will be able to protect this endemic species.

Threats to the Caves

Despite their importance, Meghalaya's caves face several threats. Limestone mining and quarrying can damage or destroy cave systems. Pollution from human activities can harm delicate cave ecosystems. Unregulated tourism can also damage cave formations and disturb wildlife. Deforestation around cave areas affects water flow and increases erosion, further threatening these fragile environments. Therefore, conservation and responsible tourism, instead of promoting the cement industry, are essential to protect Meghalaya's caves.

Conclusion

The caves of Meghalaya are among the state's greatest natural treasures. They tell the story of the Earth's geological past, support unique forms of life, and contribute to the cultural and environmental heritage of the region. Protecting these caves is the responsibility of every citizen so that future generations may continue to learn from and appreciate this remarkable natural heritage. Hopefully, the government will accord due recognition to these natural phenomena and ban mining and any activities that could put the caves in danger.

UCC Bandwagon pulls into West Bengal

By S. N. M. Abdi

After Assam, West Bengal – the politically, electorally and demographically dominant state in the east of the country – is now all set to roll out the Uniform Civil Code in the wake of the Bharatiya Janata Party's victory evicting the Trinamool Congress from power. Suvendu Adhikari, the new Chief Minister happily sitting in the fallen Mamata Banerjee's chair, has categorically said that the UCC will be in place by August. Adhikari is merely taking a leaf out other BJP-ruled states'; Assam's, Uttarakhand's and Rajasthan's; book. And like Adhikari, the BJP CMs of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh too are bent upon tightening the UCC clamp on their respective states without losing any time.

Separate, state wise UCCs are bound to create severe problems in the days to come. For example, as marriage and divorce are covered by UCC, what will happen in the case of a marriage solemnised in West Bengal, and the husband-wife migrating for better prospects to Gujarat where they decide to go their separate ways? Will they file for divorce under West Bengal's or Gujarat's UCC? This is just one example of the complexity stemming from state wise UCCs.

But the state-by-state implementation of the UCC raises an obvious fundamental question in many minds. As the UCC is one of the three top goals embedded in the BJP's ideology, along with the construction of the Ram temple and abolition of Article 370, why doesn't the all-powerful BJP enact a central legislation for nationwide implementation of the UCC, instead of various BJP-ruled states implementing it separately? Why not a countrywide federal law rather than state after state enacting their own versions of the UCC.

Separate, state wise UCCs are bound to create severe problems in the days to come. For example, as marriage and divorce are covered by UCC, what will happen in the case of a marriage solemnised in West Bengal, and the husband-wife migrating for better prospects to Gujarat where they decide to go their separate ways? Will they file for divorce under West Bengal's or Gujarat's UCC? This is just one example of the complexity stemming from state wise UCCs. There will be myriad problems crying out loud for solutions, creating frustration and dissatisfaction among ordinary people and eroding their faith in the administration of justice by those in power. And this is hardly in the BJP's interests.

I think that the three wise men -- Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his alter ego Home Minister Amit Shah and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh head Mohan Bhagwat – have been forced to adopt the piecemeal approach to the UCC because of the compulsions of coalition governance and the necessity of pandering to allies' egos.

Living up to the Jana Sangh's agenda, the BJP has been holding aloft the UCC flag since the 1980s. In the run-up to the 1996 Lok Sabha elections, the UCC figured prominently in the BJP's manifesto. But the party dropped it like a hot potato from its manifesto in 1998 and 1999. As many National Democratic Alliance constituents were not in favour of the UCC which they saw as the pro-Hindu BJP's stick to beat religious minorities like Muslims and Christians with, Atal Behari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani strategically put the UCC in cold storage.

It's not surprising at all that after getting a parliamentary majority in 2014 under Modi's leadership, the BJP lost no time in stirring the forsaken UCC pot. But in 2018, the 21st Law Commission poured buckets of cold water on the simmering pot, calling the UCC neither necessary nor desirable. However, six months before the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, the 22nd Law Commission suddenly issued a notification inviting citizens to submit their views on the contentious UCC. The term of the 22nd commission, which accorded the UCC a modicum of legitimacy, however ended before it could submit a report on the feedback it received.

The results of the last general elections too didn't augur well for the BJP's pet project. Short of numbers, the BJP had to fall back on two political parties to notch up parliamentary majority to retain power. Its newfound allies, the Telegu Desam and the Janata Dal (United), have all along been wary of the UCC. They consistently advocated a policy of arriving at a consensus after a thorough discussion before implementing the UCC. Hence, they were dead against imposing the UCC unilaterally on the nation.

Because of their opposition, the BJP failed to enact a central law for the nationwide implementation of the UCC, and had to resort to ushering in the UCC state by state. But this approach has its obvious pitfalls.

As in other BJP-ruled states, Adivasis or Scheduled Tribes, are being kept out of the UCC's purview in West Bengal too. They account for nearly six percent of the population and therefore matter electorally. Hence, STs have got a waiver! Needless to say, Muslims and Christians will be at the receiving end of the whole exercise. To maximise the BJP's political gain, Modi and Shah have already framed the UCC's implementation in newly-won West Bengal as a measure to stop infiltrators from acquiring four wives!

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In the present polarised climate in West Bengal, the opposition Congress Party, Communist Party of India (Marxist) or the Trinamool Congress have an extremely tough task on their hands. If they criticise the anti-minorities UCC, the BJP will promptly charge them with Muslim appeasement, which will draw even more Hindus to the BJP's fold swelling the saffron vote bank. Only the coming months will unveil the opposition's strategy in today's trying circumstances.

(S. N. M. Abdi is a distinguished journalist who writes on domestic politics and foreign policy.)

Letters to the Editor

Women's Empowerment

Editor,

Women do most of the work in Indian agriculture but own almost none of the land. According to the Agriculture Census 2015-16, women are roughly 73 per cent of the rural agricultural workforce, yet only about 14 per cent are operational landholders and they own only about 11 per cent of agricultural land. Oxfam India puts it similarly: over 70 per cent of the farm workforce, work under 13 per cent of the land. The Periodic Labour Force Survey 2023-24 shows that around 77 percent of rural working women are engaged in agriculture, and nearly half of them work unpaid.

This is the "feminisation of agriculture": a rising share of women in farm work, driven largely by men migrating out to non-farm jobs, leaving women to manage crops and livestock while remaining unrecorded, lower-paid and landless.

The problem is that almost every farm welfare scheme is keyed to land records. PM-KISAN, the Kisan Credit Card and crop insurance effectively require proof of land ownership, so a woman who does most of the farming but holds no title is invisible to the state. On July 2, 2026, the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly unanimously passed the Maharashtra Women Farmers Empowerment Bill, 2026, making Maharashtra the first state to legally recognise women as independent farmers. Its core instrument is a "Woman Farmer Certificate" that lets a woman access schemes, subsidies, crop insurance, concessional credit, extension services and procurement irrespective of land ownership. The Bill also creates a State Fund for Women Farmers.

The central argument is that recognition must be delinked from ownership. As long as the state defines a "farmer" by land title, it will keep excluding the very people who till the land. A certificate that recognises the worker, not the owner, is a governance fix for a social reality.

Maharashtra has passed the Women Farmers Empowerment Bill, 2026, granting women farmers legal recognition and access to agricultural schemes. The law, moved by the Devendra Fadnavis government and passed unanimously, aims to address long-standing exclusion of women from land ownership rights and benefits. It is expected to benefit millions of rural women engaged in farming across the state.

The law matters because in Maharashtra, and in the rest of India, the formal definition of a 'farmer' has been tied to land ownership, but, as the All-India Report of Agriculture Census 2015-16 showed, women hold barely 15.5 per cent of the operational agricultural land in the state. This is higher than the national average of around 12 per cent but hardly anything to crow about. In the absence of formal recognition as 'farmers', women farmers and farm widows who are engaged in every aspect from sowing the field and harvesting to rearing the livestock and poultry have been denied crop insurance, Kisan Credit Cards, and subsidies and benefits because the land records bear the names of their husbands, fathers-in-law, or other male members of the family.

The Devendra Fadnavis-led government must be commended for moving the Bill and ensuring that it received the unanimous assent of the House. It was a long-overdue move. Maharashtra was the first state in India to have brought in the state Women's Policy in June 1994 when Sharad Pawar was the chief minister. Among other initiatives, it ensured financial and property rights for all women in the state—joint property ownership for land and houses for both spouses being a significant one—which went some distance in securing women's status. While household land rights were enforced, although fitfully, the lack of specific agricultural land rights left rural women at sea in their work.

The law is a critical first step. Several aspects, from legal to societal, need to be addressed before its impact can be felt. For example, the issuing of a woman farmer certificate cannot be caught in bureaucratic hurdles causing delays; women farmers in crisis zones or farm widows need special recognition, and women's land ownership must not be dependent on inheritance from the men in the family. The Maharashtra example must be followed by other states; perhaps it is best mandated at the national level. In fact, India's reputed agricultural theorist, MS Swaminathan, had moved a Private Member's Bill to this effect in 2011, delinking land ownership from the status of 'farmer', but it lapsed in 2013. Maharashtra did well to revive it at the state level; a lot now rides on the implementation.

The Women Farmers Empowerment Bill, the first such proposed legislation in the country, seeks to acknowledge the contribution of women in farming by creating a dedicated fund to help women engaged in agriculture and provide special assistance for single female cultivators.

The bill notes that despite working alongside men from sowing to harvesting and participating in allied activities such as dairy farming and livestock rearing, women have largely remained excluded from institutional benefits because agricultural land is usually registered in the names of male family members, said Agriculture Minister

Recalling the contribution of M S Swaminathan, Bharane said the renowned agricultural scientist had advocated that farmers' welfare should remain at the centre of agricultural development and had stressed the importance of recognising women's role in the sector.

The proposed law adopts a broad definition of a "woman farmer", covering not only crop cultivation but also allied agricultural activities such as animal husbandry. "This definition reflects the rural reality and does justice to the actual contribution of women in agriculture," he said. The bill provides for the issuance of a Women Farmer identity card, which would enable beneficiaries to access agricultural financial assistance, seeds, fertilisers, e-Kisan inputs, agricultural credit and direct market linkages.

The legislation also proposes the creation of a dedicated fund for women's empowerment in agriculture, and special assistance for single women farmers, he said.

It is expected that other states will follow in the footsteps of the Maharashtra government

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*

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"Life is too short for long-term grudges."

— Elon Musk

The Shillong Times

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Myth of progress

THE World Bank's designation of India as a "lower middle income" economy should drill some sense into the minds of those who get on to their rooftops to hail the nation's economic progress under the Narendra Modi dispensation lasting around 13 years at a stretch since 2014. Notably, the Bank upgraded Asian nations Vietnam, the Philippines and Sri Lanka in our neighbourhood to "higher income" categories due to their sustained progress, the benefit of which reached the ordinary masses resulting in their uplift and better earnings. After some 80 years of 'desi' rule largely by the Congress and in recent years by the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance, India had minimal progress in terms of its people's earnings or quality of life even for the middle class segments, while the large mass of the poor continue to suffer the worst fate. The poor, rather, are treated to a regular diet of "blah-blahs" from Prime Minister Narendra Modi even as he is increasingly being on the defensive on multiple fronts now. The "economic super power status" that Modi and his brand of politicians seek to bestow on India is no more than a figment of their imagination as the World Bank grading this week amply testified. India still has one of the lowest per capita incomes even as some 20 per cent of the population thrives eminently on corruption, loot of public wealth and exploitation of the ordinary masses. Modi's rule through three terms was a poor repeat of the past with only some sectors like highways seeing significant improvements and upgrades.

Consider that the World Bank analysis of income levels across countries and states concluded that only five states in India progressed enough to ensure a decent income for their people. Curiously, three of these states are from the South – Karnataka, Telangana and Tamil Nadu – which are not ruled by the BJP. The other two states, Gujarat and Delhi, are currently ruled by the BJP. Gujarat's progress is also thanks to the generous support the Modi government extended to the state in recent years and the spillover of Mumbai's commercial activities, including the shifting of textile mills from there. Delhi grew on its own for the past three decades thanks to the economic hyperactivity it witnessed and the flow of corrupt money from the bureaucracy. The principally BJP-ruled states like Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh etc are not in the picture of significant economic development benefiting the people. So too with Bihar, where the BJP and its ally the JDU shared power and Nitish Kumar as chief minister undercut the state's progress—just as Mamata Banerjee made a further mess of Bengal. Notably, the southern states were liberal in extending governmental assistance to the lower rungs of society, while the BJP-ruled Hindi-belt states were tight-fisted and instead traded in Hindutva religiosity. The grim result is there for all to see and fathom. Add to this the fact that the chief ministers of most BJP-ruled states are good-for-nothingers.

80% Deficit Monsoons: A Looming Shadow Of An Approaching Natural Disaster?

By Toki Blah

On July 3, 2026, Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma inaugurated a workshop titled "Developing State Response for El Niño Preparedness: Strengthening Food and Water Security". He red flagged an alarming 80% rainfall deficit for the state and described climate change as an "existential crisis". Out of an average annual rainfall of 12,000mm, Meghalaya has received only 2,400 mm to date. An alarming shortfall of 9,600mm. Conrad is the Chief Minister and he should know what he is talking about. There's no reason to doubt him. He must also have received official reports on the behaviour of the monsoons and its dreaded adverse impact on agricultural production. He has called for a long term comprehensive action plan to tackle the looming natural disaster. The CM, however, stopped there without naming the specific natural disaster he had in mind. Most probably he did not want to cause undue panic so confined himself only on the El Nino affects. "El Nino" brings in extreme weather shifts; weaker monsoons together with unbearable heat waves. In short what the CM was talking about are symptoms of a forthcoming Drought! Meghalaya has never experienced Drought. The question, therefore, is: Are we prepared for it?

This write up is not to challenge the statement of the CM. Far from it. The Meghalaya Government's recognition of the danger signals that an 80% rainfall deficit can bring is commendable. With no intention of being presumptuous, the author, as DC of Banda, a drought prone district in UP, Central India, was personally involved in managing one of the worst Bundelkhand droughts that lasted from 1979 to 1981. This write-up aims to share that experience. Drought is a natural disaster with a difference. Others like floods, hailstone, earthquakes or even fires occur suddenly, casualties occur and collateral damage happens in the twinkling of an eye. One is then usually left only with the task of relief disbursement. The onset of drought is different. It does not come with a bang. The calamity creeps with terrifying slowness over the land. The earliest signals of a forthcoming drought is erratic, declining rainfall and unusual higher temperatures (already happening to Meghalaya). Then the moisture in the soil start disappearing resulting in ground too hard to plough, harder to till, too dry for seeds to sprout. This is usually followed by drying and untimely curling and browning of vegetation. Water levels in water bodies begin to recede and shrink. Worst of all, population migration begins. These are the characteristics of a drought. Precursors of a famine perhaps. The question is how prepared is Meghalaya on dealing with this unknown natural calamity?

Drawing from my own experience, there are two ways people approach the onslaught of drought. The first approach advocates passive reaction , by responding to each phase of the drought as and when it happens and hope for the best. This is a knee jerk reaction which can only result in greater confusion amidst the chaos that drought brings along. The second approach is based on a preconceived roadmap on how to manage a drought. It's unplanned reaction vs planned management. The Meghalaya Government's approach so far appears to focus on the second approach. Why do I say this? I say it because the victim of any natural disaster is the common man. The ordinary citizen will be completely bewildered and stumped as he sees the failure of nature around him. Panic and confusion will be his initial reaction, which if not handled in the initial phase can lead to serious law and order issues. However, people will tend to maintain their calmness and composure if they are assured by physical evidence or audio devices that the Government is working to help them through the turmoil. Towards this, let me briefly outline what the Government needs to do to assuage public fear while simultaneously appearing to be in control of the situation.

As mentioned above deficit rainfall is the first symptom of drought and it is the agriculturalist who is the first to notice this. Deprived of rain he notices that the crops he has already sown begin to wilt and wither away. The earth will also be too dry for him to plough for his usual rainfed crops. This brings in a paralysis of helplessness and it is the responsibility of the administration to assure the farmer that they are aware of his plight and that they also have a planned solution for his apprehensions. The solution as part of a greater Drought Relief effort is to distribute drought resistant seeds to affected hillside agriculturalists. For hillside rice-growing marginal farmers populating the Meghalayan countryside, drought resistant paddy varieties such as Sahbhagi Dhan and Anjali are suitable. These are not only immune to drought conditions but are short duration crops and they help dissipate the sense of helplessness. Besides the above paddy seeds, our farmers can also be encouraged to go in for other drought resistant varieties such as millets (bajra, jowar, ragi), pulses (chickpea, pigeon pea, moong), and oilseeds (sesame, groundnut, mustard) as the most reliable alternatives. These crops thrive in shallow soils, tolerate erratic rainfall, and provide both food security and income stability to the rural population.

The shrinking of wells, lakes , springs and other water sources will be the next crucial item on the drought menu . The trouble with rural Meghalaya villages is that they are usually hill top habitations, dependant on hillside springs for their water requirements. Once such springs dry up the only remedy is either to shift to some other location or to fetch water from the river far down the hillside. Neither is feasible. So arrangement to supply water by tankers is usually the only solution for such problem areas. For valley and plain rural settlements, bore wells are often the most reliable and instant relivers. Pre drought identification of such problematic settlements would be of great help on planning the management of this disaster. Now aside from making available drinking water, the population also needs to be fed.

As part of the Drought Relief campaign, a rigorous Food-for – Work (FFW) programme also needs to be set up. FFW programes are designed not just to provide immediate sustenance but also to create long-term, sustainable community assets. The idea is that while people receive food grains for their labour, the work they do strengthens the village's infrastructure. FFW projects can range from road construction to check-dam construction, farm ponds and tanks, gully plugging and a host of other activities that different Government departments such as PWD, Soil Conservation, Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, PHE etc can identify. An early pre drought format for identification of the works that can be taken up, District or Block wise , would be of immense help in subsequent Relief Work.

Let us now assume we are in the midst of a hectic Drought Relief Programe. FFW and massive water supply activities are busy all over the place . In such a situation, work supervision assumes critical importance. The nature of the exercise undertaken requires supervision at three levels. Firstly at the work site level, a supervisor is needed to ensure proper supervision and measurement of work to ensure equitable payment to the beneficiaries under FFW program. Next required is supervision at the Block level. This level inspects, scrutinises and addresses complaints received from the field. The third level is at the District level under the Chairmanship of the DC. This level coordinates and attends to issues that the other two levels are not able to handle. Addressing complaints and ensuring format observance is the main task at this level. Here one must caution that complaints of resource misuse must be treated as a high-priority task because even a hint of corruption or misuse, if not addressed promptly, can jeopardise the entire operation. Officers and staff will then be engaged more in enquiry duties than on actual relief work. Therefore all such complaints, if proven, are to be nipped in the bud as quickly as possible and punishment to the guilty carried out without delay.

In a drought situation, the press, media, politicians, and their parties, can play both a positive role and a destabilising role. Sensationalising events based on mere gossip can cause a massive disruptive response from a panic stricken public. Reports of starvation deaths can cause an undue uproar even in Parliament and even in the international media. It has been observed that opportunistic politics sometimes create uncalled for situations by claiming that the District has run out of foodgrains. To avoid such disturbances, the DC of any affected district should give weekly press conferences to allay public sentiment. Another trick to assure the public of the availability of food is to stack foodgrain in the open. This can be done by storing such food in the open but under guard in Block HQs. Visual evidence of the availability of food grains leads to public confidence. It helps in avoiding food riots and other acts of public desperation.

Trapped in the Colonial Web of Knowledge

By Randolph Langstieh

"If 'cutting trees into parts' epitomises the modernist epistemology, 'talking with trees,' I argue, epitomises animistic epistemology."

— Andreas Weber

Epistemology, the theory of knowledge that weighs the methods, validity and scope of justified belief, sits predominantly within Western or Eurocentric paradigms. Knowledge production is counted as progress in modern society — a by-product of colonial frameworks embedded in pedagogical practice through our educational institutions. Even where postcolonial discourse takes up indigenous knowledge systems as its subject matter, the approach to learning them remains lodged in colonial binaries: organic and inorganic, natural and unnatural, animate and inanimate. In the indigenous worldview, belief and knowledge are not two separate entities. All things are animate and have a spirit; the Khasi know them as ki ksuid ki khrei. The belief in ki 'suid um ki 'suid wah is knowledge in itself, where water bodies and their spirits are inseparable.

U maw (stone), ka um (water), ka lyer (wind), u slap (rain) are not inanimate in the Khasi worldview; we interact and communicate with them. A young man from Mawdulop village in the Wah Umngot area, speaking in a short documentary by U Nongsain Hima, said that the Umngot is like a woman to us — a mother who feeds and nourishes, ka nongai buiñ-aithiang, who takes care of the fishes, the trees, the medicinal plants. The river has a life of her own. It corresponds to the Whanganui River in New Zealand (Aotearoa), granted legal personhood by an Act of Parliament in 2017 within a framework that recognises the community as custodians and incorporates the physical and the metaphysical alike. In the Eurocentric worldview, such recognition is reduced to a term long fastened upon indigenous cultures — animism. Andreas Weber puts it appropriately: animism is the cosmology of indigenous peoples, a worldview whose practices and knowledge can be of crucial guidance for the multiple crises of our time. For the Khasi, likewise, our cosmology has been delimited to a religious practice, a belief unverified by Western standards.

What does this colonial web do on the ground? Consider a finding from my own research at Nongnah and its neighbouring villages. Generations of Khasi readers have learnt from the printed page that Ka Shnong Ka Ïawpaw — U Lum Ka Ïawpaw near Nongnah — is the village of the dead, the land of departed spirits. The earliest written record of that description dates back to 1906, in the Khasi-English Dictionary of U Nissor Singh. Text after text has carried the description since, and across more than a century of schooling it became true without ever being verified. Yet the knowledge holders of Nongnah, Khatarshnong and other parts of the Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills, whose learning lives in oral transmission, make no association between Ka Ïawpaw and the spirits of the dead at all.

My conversations in the Lngam areas point to how the error likely crept in. For the Lngam people, any association with the departed belongs to the spirit of Ïawaw — the gateway through whom the spirits pass on their way to U Lum Pyndengru. Given the geographical proximity of these communities and the phonological closeness of the two names, it is most plausible that Ïawaw was conflated with Ïawpaw by the early codifiers. In my analysis of the lore, Ka Blei Ïawpaw is nothing of the graveyard: she is Ka Mei-Ramew, the spirit of Mother Earth — the nourisher, the caretaker, the custodian of beings animate and inanimate, ka Syiem ki ksuid whom even the malevolent spirits respect. The consequences of the codified error are not academic. It has wrapped U Lum Ka Ïawpaw in fear and eeriness, keeping people away from a hill whose own custodians revere it as the seat of the Earth's guardian spirit. One dictionary entry, set down in the shadow of the colonial classroom, has overwhelmed an oral discourse for over a hundred years.

The tradition, by contrast, carries an ecological ethic that our textbooks never recorded. An elder from Nongktieh locality in Nongnah once scolded a young companion for slashing shrubs on the way to fetch firewood: "Don't slash the shrubs; Ka Ïawpaw will punish you. Cut only what is necessary." Ka Ïawpaw teaches us to be careful with Mother Earth. In the lore, she is an ecological force balancing the survival of all beings, punishing when the boundaries between them are broken, whether the violation is human or non-human. At a time when we speak the borrowed languages of climate crisis and sustainability, here is a home-grown jurisprudence of restraint — dismissed for a century as the superstition of a haunted hill.

This is what Linda Tuhiwai Smith, the Maori scholar, means when she writes that "writing has been viewed as the mark of a superior civilization and other societies have been judged, by this view, to be incapable of thinking critically and objectively." For Khasi society, writing is a product of colonisation, and the codification of our knowledge systems must consider careful strides. Codification tends toward rigidity; the written text is static and archival, while orality is in motion with the flux of the cosmos, interacting and reacting with all beings. And as Ka Ïawpaw shows, an archived mistake becomes curriculum.

The colonial science of discovery has its own creation stories. Studying U Lum Sohpetbneng from an anthropocentric point of view merely approximates us as first settlers, reduced to a hypothetical age. The first-settler narrative is a colonial perspective — a Christopher Columbus syndrome, I call it, after a "discovery" that owed no due diligence to the peoples of Turtle Island, the original inhabitants of what the Europeans named America. Their worldview carries connotations similar to ours. For the indigenous, creation is continuity, as the Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear reminds us; we are part of a perpetual flux within the cosmos and in relation to it. Our own story of u sohpetbneng and u sohpet blei is not a dated event sealed in the past but the cycle of birth and life, witnessed by all of creation.

None of this is a plea against method. My encounter with a traditional healer offers a glimpse of indigenous knowledge at work. Asked how he knew the herb that treats a snake bite, he narrated his discovery: in the forest he saw a rat bitten by a snake, followed it in curiosity, and learnt of the plant the rat sought out to feed on — the cure. By colonial standards, this is naturalistic observation, the most ethical form of research with life-forms. Indigenous knowledge is not the absence of method; it is method embedded in relation.

The sun does not rise in the east nor set in the west; it is only within human perception that it does. Mihngi and sepngi — the sun appears and disappears — sit closer to that reality. Yet in elementary education, the rising and setting sun is marked correct and true, just as the village of the dead was marked correct for a hundred years. If we do not gather indigenous knowledge from its own epistemological and ontological premise, we will only lend more credibility to the colonial science of discovery and exploration as the only legitimate knowledge. Revisiting and reconstructing our knowledge systems along an indigenous paradigmatic frame will pave the way to deeper insight — and to a reality more considerate of a heritage at crossroads.

(The writer researches Indigenous knowledge systems and paradigms. Email: langstiehrandolph@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

The ILP Dilemma: Why Pre-Election Promises Must Yield to Governance Accountability

Editor,

Every election cycle in Meghalaya follows a predictable script. Political aspirants traverse the hills, promising to protect indigenous identity and strictly implement the public will. They pledge robust mechanisms to check unregulated influx and illegal immigration. Yet, once the dust settles and the Treasury benches are occupied, a familiar administrative paralysis sets in. The transition from passionate campaign rhetoric on the streets to passive governance inside the Secretariat remains the greatest source of public disillusionment in the state.

For years, the core of this debate has centered on the demand for the Inner Line Permit (ILP). Successive Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (MDA) governments have acknowledged the issue, passing resolutions and holding consultations. However, concrete implementation remains elusive. In the absence of a central nod for the ILP, the state introduced the Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Act (MRSSA). Intended as a comprehensive framework to register tenants and monitor influx, the MRSSA has largely failed to inspire public confidence. On the ground, citizens and civil society groups argue that the Act lacks teeth, enforcement is erratic, and it functions as a paperwork exercise rather than an active deterrent against illegal settlement.

This enforcement vacuum has forced pressure groups and traditional institutions to fill the void. Social media platforms are frequently flooded with visuals of youth organizations actively conducting physical checks, detecting undocumented settlers, and demanding accountability. This creates a deeply unsettling irony. While citizens and community leaders work day and night to guard their localities, the state machinery often appears indifferent to the visible proliferation of unauthorized settlements.

More concerning is the Government's standard administrative response to public anxiety. When citizens take to the streets or march to the Secretariat to demand the fulfillment of electoral promises, they are frequently met not with dialogue, but with the imposition of restrictive measures like Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (now Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita). Using prohibitive legal orders against the very electorate that chose them creates a sharp rift between the public and their representatives. It sends a message that the state is more focused on managing dissent than addressing the root causes of that dissent.

Meghalaya's political leadership must recognize that public patience is finite. Across India, mature electorates are increasingly voting based on tangible deliverables rather than repetitive manifestos. If political parties continue to treat existential issues like demographic security as mere bargaining chips for power, the political landscape will inevitably shift.

Voters are no longer passive observers; they are actively archiving broken promises. If the current trajectory of administrative inaction continues, politicians may find a cold reception in the next election cycle. When candidates return to local constituencies to canvas for votes, they will face an electorate that evaluates them on historical performance, not future assurances. The public knows precisely which parties possess the political will to legislate inside the Assembly and protect the state's interests.

The mandate of governance is to lead, protect, and execute. It is time for the Government to step out of its defensive shell, bridge the enforcement gaps of the MRSSA, and pursue the ILP with genuine political courage. True leadership lies in honouring the direction shown by the public, rather than shielding the executive from the very people it was elected to serve.

Yours etc.,
H.Umdor
Via email

Byrnihat Pollution Must Be Urgently Addressed

Editor,

Recent statements from the Meghalaya Government regarding Byrnihat's pollution are deeply disappointing. The Health Minister said, "We came to know through social media." "No formal complaint on Byrnihat ethanol factories' health impact." These remarks by Meghalaya's Health Minister have been making the rounds on social media. At the same time, news headlines proclaim: "Meghalaya Pollution Control Board Finds No Emission Violations at Byrnihat Unit," "Ethanol Plant Emissions in Byrnihat Within Permissible Limits," and "Meghalaya Pollution Control Board Clears Distillery of Pollution Charges." Rather than reassuring the public, these statements expose an alarming disconnect between official responses and the lived reality of the people of Byrnihat.

In April, I attended the Shillong Literature Festival in Delhi, where the Chief Minister was asked about the pollution in Byrnihat. His response was that "most of the pollution is generated by factories located on the Assam side of the border." That may very well be true. But it is only a partial answer. The question was never simply about where the pollution originates. The question is: What is the Meghalaya government doing to protect its own citizens who are living with the consequences of this pollution every single day?

A few days after the festival in Delhi, I saw a news report of the Chief Minister inaugurating Dhar Plywood in Byrnihat. The report described it as one of the largest plywood manufacturing units in Meghalaya and the Northeast—a factory whose operations will inevitably require the felling of thousands of trees to feed its production. The company's website proudly carries the tagline: "Strength That Begins at the Source—Premium plywood crafted from authentic Meghalaya Pinewood, sourced from the Scotland of the East."

How do we come to terms with such irony? We proudly market Meghalaya as the "Scotland of the East," celebrating its forests as a source of pride and identity, while simultaneously expanding industries that depend on cutting those very forests, even as one of the state's gateways continues to make headlines for hazardous air quality.

If the Meghalaya Pollution Control Board inspected these factories and found no violations, are they blind to what the people of Byrnihat have been witnessing for years? Are they blind to the haze that regularly engulfs the town? If emissions are indeed "within permissible limits," then perhaps it is time to ask whether those permissible limits are adequate to protect public health.

What is even more disturbing is the suggestion that the Government became aware of the issue only through social media and that the absence of formal complaints somehow diminishes the seriousness of the problem. Public health cannot depend on whether citizens have filed the correct paperwork. Governments exist not merely to respond to complaints but to anticipate, investigate, and prevent harm.

Pollution does not recognise state boundaries. Whether the emissions originate from factories in Assam or Meghalaya is ultimately irrelevant to the residents who breathe the same air. Passing responsibility across the border will not clean the air or protect public health.

The people of Byrnihat deserve more than explanations and procedural excuses. They deserve transparency, rigorous and independent monitoring, public disclosure of environmental and health data, and decisive action against industries found to be contributing to the crisis—regardless of which side of the interstate border they are located.

The question before our government is not whether pollution exists. The question is whether it has the political will to confront it.

Yours etc.,
Dominic Sangma
Via email

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

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"One of the greatest and simplest tools for learning more and growing is doing more."
—Washington Irving

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A Conspiratorial Silence

MEGHALAYA has no dearth of pressure groups who are deferentially referred to as NGOs, although they don't qualify to be called as such because they are non-registered bodies. The Khasi Students' Union (KSU) is obsessed with the uranium issue and the fact that some wealthy tribals are buying land in and around Domiasiat, West Khasi Hills. Across the country the youth are troubled by the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) and the fiasco over the manner of correction of the CBSE papers. In Meghalaya data states that 3815 students wrote their NEET exams this year. They have not joined forces with the protestors at Jantar Mantar either because they must have done very well and are sure of passing that exam or because they are not used to speaking up for a cause. Perhaps they are looking at someone else to start a similar protest here. Across the country and more so in Delhi young people have joined the hunger strike to demand the stepping down of Education Minister, Dharmendra Pradhan for messing up such an important examination.

Investigators into the NEET exam paper leak found that portions of the question paper had been circulated before the examination, with substantial overlap between the leaked material and the actual paper used on the day of the examination. They have also zeroed in on an organized cheating racket involving criminal networks that were selling access to the leaked paper and facilitating cheating for candidates across several states. The investigation has now been handed over to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) but the plight of 22.05 lakh students hangs in the balance especially those who did well in the first round but were so shocked by the paper leak that they could perhaps not have given their best in the second round. It is psychologically disturbing for young people to know they can't trust their examination system and that so much is left to chance and to all kinds of criminal elements in this country. An Education Minister that cannot even guarantee free and fair examinations has no right to continue to sit and preside over his Ministry and an important one at that, on which hangs the fates of millions of aspiring youth. Yet the protest by the Cockroach Janata Party at Jantar Mantar is looked at askance by the Modi Government and different motives are attributed to Abhijit Dipke and Sonam Wangchuk the leaders of the movement.

In Meghalaya it would be expected of the Khasi Students' Union to lend their weight behind the CJP movement but there's only a conspiratorial silence as the Union continues to be fixated with other political issues but shows no interest in education related ones. That's the plight of 'real' students in Meghalaya. There's no one to take up their cause. The same is true for students who wrote their CBSE exams. After the results were declared more than 1.6 lakh students applied for verification or re-evaluation within just a few days. This happened after a young student - a professional hacker- went public and stated that the evaluation process may have had systematic errors and he proved this with facts. If young people of this country lose faith in a system that tests their intelligence and critical thinking capacities then who and what do they place their faith on? The fact that the Education Minister stubbornly holds on to his chair is an insult to the youth of this country.

El Nino & Lessons from the Meghalayan Age

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Recently, the Chief Minister of Meghalaya, Conrad Sangma, held a workshop on El Niño preparedness in the state. This climatic phenomenon, which occurs every two to seven years, is the result of unusually warm sea temperatures over the tropical Pacific Ocean, which affects the monsoon in South and Southeast Asia, resulting in reduced rainfall in these regions. As a result, there are already reports that farmers in India have planted nearly 23% fewer summer crops—namely rice, cotton, corn, and soybeans—than they had during the same period last year.

No comparable data are available specifically for Meghalaya. But considering that around 80% of the population is rural, agriculture is primarily rain-fed, and over 60% of the labour force is engaged in agriculture and allied sectors, there is no doubt that this will have a large impact, especially on the rural economy. As a consequence, it will lead to a fall in demand in general and a rise in food prices is also likely. So, while the contribution of agriculture to GDP is just below 20%, the overall impact on the economy will be much greater. Therefore, unless steps are taken to compensate for the losses the rural population is going to face—either through increased investment in labour-intensive sectors (e.g., a rise in the allocation to VB-GRAM G) or some form of income support—it is going to be a very difficult year for the people of the state in particular and the country in general.

Extreme events like El Niño are part of the global climatic pattern and are to be expected. But the rise in global temperatures due to climate change will mean that, in the future, El Niño could become not only more frequent but also more intense, which poses a serious threat to agriculture and, through its multiplier effects, to other sectors of the economy as well. And if the situation worsens, we could witness a repeat of an event that took place around 4,000 years ago, an event so significant that an entire geological age was named after it. This period marked the beginning of the Meghalayan Age.

Earth's 4.5-billion-year-old history can be divided into many parts based on distinct events that have taken place in the past. The largest of these divisions is the eon, of which there are four: the Hadean, Archean, Proterozoic, and Phanerozoic. The last eon is the one in which we are currently living, and it began 541 million years ago, when the Earth experienced the development of plants and the release of free oxygen that helped drive the rapid evolution of various life forms. An eon can, in turn, be divided into eras, which can subsequently be subdivided into periods, epochs, and ages.

We are currently living in the Cenozoic Era, Quaternary Period, Holocene Epoch, and Meghalayan Age. All these divisions are based on rock formations and fossils. Both indicators are repositories of the changes that have taken place on Earth and contain clues about past climatic and geological conditions. The Meghalayan Age is a little different than the rest because it is the first geological age whose defining climatic event has been shown to have had a profound impact on human history. In fact, since the Holocene Epoch, human impact on the environment has also grown dramatically.

The Holocene Epoch started after the end of the Pleistocene, which corresponds with the end of the last glacial period and also with the end of the Paleolithic Age (Old Stone Age) in human history. This was the period on which the famous animated movie Ice Age was based, and mammoths were the iconic animals of that period. The beginning of the Holocene is also important because agriculture was discovered by humans around this time. The domestication of rice in South China by Austro-Asiatic speakers, to whom the Khasis are related, took place during this period. In fact, before this period, human society was characterised by hunting and gathering. The uncertainty and extensive nature of this type of economy ensured that the human population could never grow very large. It was agriculture that allowed the generation of surplus, which was then used by different human societies to build great civilisations such as the Harappan, Egyptian, Sumerian, and Chinese civilisations. It is this link with these civilisations that brings us to the current age, the Meghalayan Age.

The concept of the Meghalayan Age was first proposed because of specific chemical signatures found in stalactites and stalagmites in a cave at Mawmluh, a small village located in the East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya. This cave is 7.2 km long and in 2003, researchers, accompanied by Brian Kharpran Daly, a cave enthusiast and explorer from Meghalaya, conducted a geological study in the cave and collected stalagmite specimens. It was the ratio of oxygen isotopes found in these specimens that provided the crucial evidence for identifying the Meghalayan Age as part of the geological time scale. Oxygen has two stable isotopes: ^{16}O (the lighter one, with 8 protons and 8 neutrons) and ^{18}O (the heavier one, with 8 protons and 10 neutrons). The ratio of oxygen isotopes reflects fluctuations in rainfall patterns. During extended dry periods, rainwater contains a higher proportion of ^{18}O, and its elevated concentration can therefore be used to infer a decrease in rainfall during such periods. This is exactly what scientists found at Mawmluh.

In a 2012 paper, An Abrupt Shift in the Indian Monsoon 4000 Years Ago, Berkelhammer and colleagues found that around 4,000 years ago there was a shift in rainfall patterns, characterised by either an earlier Indian Summer Monsoon withdrawal or a general decline in the total amount of monsoon precipitation. They inferred this after analysing a high-resolution stalagmite oxygen-isotope record spanning the early and mid-Holocene from Mawmluh, Meghalaya, which showed a higher ratio of ^{18}O in the stalagmite specimens collected from the cave. The authors suggested that changes in the El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO), along with other factors, must have played an important role in influencing the strength of the monsoon. This period of weakened monsoon lasted for around 200 years and coincided with climatic changes occurring across North Africa, the Middle East, the Tibetan Plateau, southern Europe, and North America.

Even though the authors did not establish causation, they did suggest that prolonged drought could have been responsible for the deurbanisation of the Harappan Civilisation and the similar societal reorganisation of the Old Kingdom Nile Civilisation. Both these civilisations were agrarian-based and must have found it difficult to sustain themselves in light of reduced water availability. Because the specimen that provided the evidence came from Meghalaya, the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) announced that the new division of geological time would be called the Meghalayan Age and would appear on all official charts depicting Earth's geological past.

A similar study conducted in the Gupteswar Cave (Odisha) and the Kadapa caves (Andhra Pradesh) by scientists at the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM) reached a similar conclusion, identifying a prolonged drought period around 4,000 years ago. Among the factors suggested for the weakened monsoon regime were El Niño events, which are believed to have contributed to the collapse of the Harappan Civilization. Therefore, if El Niño events become more pronounced in the coming years, there is every possibility that their impact on present-day society will be equally decisive.

The Meghalayan Age is very appropriate for the time in which we are living, when human impact has resulted in drastic changes to the global climate regime. Climate change projections have indicated that dry areas will become drier and wet areas will become wetter. In other words, intensified droughts and floods are going to become more common. This will have a drastic impact on food production systems, just as it did 4,000 years ago, when the mega-drought led to the decline of ancient agrarian civilisations and heralded the birth of the Meghalayan Age.

Among the measures that the Chief Minister spoke about to tackle situations such as El Niño, he stressed the need to innovate and develop farming practices suited to Meghalaya's unique geographical and climatic conditions. It is here that the biodiversity-rich traditional farming practices of the indigenous peoples of Meghalaya can provide a very important solution. The Chief Minister also emphasised the need for integrated measures such as water conservation, spring rejuvenation, the construction of check dams and reservoirs, and other water-retention structures to enhance long-term water security. Here, one needs to ask what has happened to the 2019 Meghalaya Water Policy. Wasn't it designed for this very purpose? These and other questions will become increasingly important, particularly as we can expect more events like El Niño in the future. Whether the Government can tackle these challenges remains to be seen.

(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)

Linguistic pejoration in Khasi society: Reclaiming our vocabulary from tribalism

By Mankular Lamin Gashnga

I was reading Bhogtoram Mawroh's article where he used the word Synteng to refer to who we also call Pnar, and I found myself wondering whether he was wrong. Then the word *Khynriam* came to mind and I wondered if it is wrong. Then the word *Maram* came to mind and I again wondered whether it is wrong. Then came the word Dkhar. Then came the word Mawlai and so on.

It made me wonder that if Pnar people say *Khynriam* whether it is derogatory; or when we, the War-Amlarem people, say *Hynriem*, or when War-Pynursla people say *Phlang*. I wonder if when a *Khynriam* says *Synteng* whether it is derogatory. Or when a *Khynriam* or a *Synteng* says *Maram* whether it is derogatory. O whether Bhoi can be similarly construed as derogatory because, when in War-Amlarem we say Nongtalang Bhoi, is it really derogatory. I was also thinking whether Dkhar is actually derogatory because it must have been once a perfectly respectable term to have been used as a clan name and as part of many clan names through the tangjait system.

My mind also wandered into how we use even everyday words to mean dirty things when, in fact, those words are actually clean and harmless. For example, one has to be very careful when speaking Khasi so as not to use the word pylleng, lest it be given a vulgar meaning. In fact, I have heard one person strongly cautioning against using the word to refer to eggs. Take the word kpu, or bread, as another example. It has been so sexualised that it is now very rarely used in common parlance. If you want to say bread or biscuits, you'd have to say some vague word like jingbam or something, when in fact kpu is very reverently used in the Bible even for sacramental bread. In recent times I have noticed that people are very cautious when using the word lok, or partner, for example, and prefer to use instead menkpa/menkmie so as to avoid the awkwardness. This is after the word tnga, or spouse, has been stigmatised to mean something derogatory; though it is a word used very generously in the Bible, which means that this word must have once been a very dignified word in the Khasi vocabulary. I have even heard words like 'Catholic' (Roman), 'Protestant' (Prot), 'Hindu' (traditional religion), and so on being used contemptuously when people speak of each other's religions, using otherwise innocent words as insults. This is not yet even taking into account how we attach epithets to almost every proper noun (even names of people) we can get our tongues on in order to tear them to shreds and to brutalise those we consider as the other, the examples of which I will not even care to point out as we all know them too well.

I also came to the realisation that the problem is not with the words, but the problem is how we use words to mean dirty things. The problem, therefore, is with our mindset — with our tribal mindset. We have the tendency to tribalise words to create alienation and otherness in order to satisfy our tribal instincts. Therefore, it is very easy for us to take any word and make it sound derogatory and offensive for no reason at all other than to satisfy our baser instincts.

I also began to realise that, as writers, we should not add insult to injury or lend validation to pejoration, and that we should be very careful in what we write and what we speak. We have a moral responsibility.

At this point, I apologise because I think I will have to quote our discussion as writers, sometimes intense, with no ill intention personally to anyone but just to illustrate my point. During a discussion on social media about the above-mentioned article, I came across HH Mohrmen's comment where he equated the use of the word Synteng to the use of the words Negro and Redskin. I criticised the comparison as too serious a comparison and said that, as a writer, one should tread with caution in using words, and that nor do the words *Khynriam* or *Maram* carry such equivalence.

With due apologies and with all due respect to the elder and fellow writer, I'll have to cite one more example, just to illustrate my point more strongly because it is pertinent, but again with no ill feelings or personal attack but purely for intellectual discussion. For example, in one of his 2018 articles, Mohrmen wrote that there is a clan name in our War-Amlarem area, and I quote, "which is Pohtam that literarily means, the lowest status or rank, and there is a man from this clan whose name is High Born. If one reads the name and surname together, his name reads as High Born Pohtam in which the name and the surname have the total opposite meaning – ironic indeed. The name is High Born, who is of a lowest status or rank." This anecdote, while it sounds amusing, could not be further from the truth and has, in fact, so badly misconstrued a very noble word Poh to mean low rank, when in fact in War-Amlarem it means the womb or the belly. Hence Pohtam does not mean the lowest rank; it simply means "from the womb (*poh*) of a mother named Tam." There are many such clan names in the War-Amlarem society such as *Pohlong, Pohkshang, Pohti, Pohkyrnu, Pohthmi*, and so on, and they have nothing to do with how Mohrmen has connoted them to mean.

Then I came to the realisation: Why me? Why should I be the only one responsible for correcting the terms other people use? Are we not all responsible as a community for the words we use? Is that not more applicable to us as writers?

Ultimately, only Bhogtoram can answer the premise of the article because, if it is used in good faith, and in accordance with the sources he cites, then why not? The term *Synteng* carries no derogatory meaning in and of itself.

Therefore, it really depends on us as native speakers of the Khasi language how we use terms like Poh, Tam, *Khynriam, Pnar/Synteng, Maram, Bhoi, Lyngngam*, and so on, and how we use even ordinary words like *kpu, pylleng*, Hindu and so on, to be able to rise above such pettiness. I think that is fair to say so because that is the beauty of the human mind: it can either create heaven or hell and be utterly corrupt or profoundly refined.

How we use words depends on how much hostility and resentment we harbour in our hearts against each other for no other reason than that we perceive someone to be different from us. It depends on how much perversion we carry within our own minds to make innocent words mean or imply dirty things. That is the root of tribalism. Words can become instruments of tribalism. If we continue along this path, our society will be more and more fragmented and broken by how we weaponise words in order to sustain our tribal worldview. This is the time to reflect and repent about carrying such mindsets lest every innocent, respectable word we have today becomes corrupt and unusable. For if we continue along this current path with this current tribal mindset, it will not be long before words like Khasi, Pnar, War, Dkhar, and so on are rendered unusable in common parlance because they will be burdened with the baggage of misplaced resentment. It is time we purified our minds and reclaimed our lost vocabulary.

Letters to the Editor

Misuse of Government Quarters

Editor,

I write this letter as a concerned citizen regarding the use of the Government quarters reserved for Members of the Legislative Assembly at Inverniel Compound, Kench's Trace, Shillong.

There is concern among residents that these Government quarters are being used to host parties and late-night social gatherings. If this is indeed occurring, it raises important questions about whether public property is being used in accordance with its intended purpose. Such activities may also cause inconvenience to nearby residents due to noise and disturbance, particularly during late hours.

Government residences are public assets maintained with taxpayers' money and are intended to support elected representatives in carrying out their official responsibilities. It is therefore important that they are used in a manner that reflects the dignity and responsibility of public office.

I respectfully urge the concerned authorities to examine this matter objectively and clarify whether the use of these quarters for private gatherings complies with the applicable rules and regulations. Transparency and accountability in the use of public property are essential to maintaining public confidence.

I also request The Shillong Times to look into this matter in public interest and, if appropriate, bring greater attention to the issue.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request (A concerned citizen)
Via email

Sohra Speaks: Save Humanity, Not Criminality

Editor,

No other incident in Meghalaya's history shook the nation like the murder of businessman Raja Raghuvanshi of Indore in Sohra. What was most disturbing was the reaction of citizens from outside the state. They rushed to blame the people of Meghalaya. Even big media houses kept trying to paint Meghalaya in a bad light, and that hurt us deeply.

Kudos to the investigative agencies, including the police. With the sharp precision of Sherlock Holmes, they uncovered the truth behind the tragedy. The findings were so shocking that many who had accused Meghalaya later admitted they were wrong and offered public apologies.

What emerged was totally unbelievable. The newlywed wife, Sonam Raghuvanshi, under the pretext of a honeymoon in Meghalaya, allegedly plotted her husband's murder with the help of her undisclosed lover, Raj Kushwaha, and three hired men. It is terrifying to think that love, meant to be the warmth of trust and sacrifice, was twisted into a weapon of betrayal.

Frankly speaking, to plan and carry out such a horrendous crime against a man who had trusted her completely must have required a heart devoid of humanity. Well, taking revenge on someone who offends you is one thing, but eliminating someone who has given you love and lifelong commitment is another. The two acts are worlds apart, as different as "heaven and hell"!

The saddest part is that Sonam was granted bail on what many considered weak technical grounds. This decision shocked not only the government but also ordinary citizens in Meghalaya and across the country ("Meghalaya moves SC, seeks stay on Sonam's bail", ST, July 3). This raises unpleasant questions --- if justice can be bent so easily, does it mean that any dreaded criminal can escape punishment by hiring clever advocates? Can lies be embellished to make them look like the real truth? Whether one agrees or not, this is a serious concern before modern jurisprudence. Needless to say, countless ill-fated people are languishing behind bars not because they are guilty of crimes but because they cannot afford smart lawyers, while criminals with fat wallets walk free. One netizen writes on social media -- "if Sonam was not guilty, then who was? She had even confessed to the crime in June 2025. Logically, how could a wife bring three persons to the very site of her honeymoon with her newly married husband unless there was a sinister motive? If she was innocent, why did she flee to Ghazipur in Uttar Pradesh? Why was not even a single phone call made from Sohra, from Guwahati, or at any point until the police finally caught Sonam in Uttar Pradesh after about two weeks?" Of course, even when a pet goes missing, its owner searches frantically and reports to the police. Please correct me if I am wrong. How then could a wife remain silent when her husband vanished in the middle of their honeymoon?

Yes, this tragedy leaves us with many questions. It has shrouded us in deep apprehension. A worried mother of two asks, "Is our judicial system strong enough to uphold the truth, or does it crumble at flimsy loopholes that let crime go unpunished?" Is the peace in society not completely dependent on the sanctity of the justice system?

Why is there so much public outcry for "justice"? Something is going amiss. People are losing faith in many things these days. One college professor retorts, "The Sohra tragedy is not merely about the death of one man. It is a story of broken trust, of how fragile human relationships can be, and of the cracks in our justice system. If such cases are not dealt with utmost seriousness, society will have to pay the price. Our family peace and social harmony will be completely at stake."

A chilling copycat incident soon followed in Lohagadwadi, Maharashtra. Siya, a 20-year-old girl from Pune, reportedly orchestrated the murder of her fiancé, Ketan Agarwal. She arranged for her lover, Chetan, to push him down a steep gorge. This is how cruelty is spreading its wings so dangerously. One wonders why the younger generation is consumed by distorted thinking and drawn into fearsome acts. Will they ever find peace after chasing ruthless ambition?

Alas, how long can society keep receiving bruises when love, trust, and peace are pushed off the cliff of betrayal? How one wishes that we all could stand together to save humanity and not support criminality!

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

Using Teachers for Non-School Duties

Editor,

I fully endorse the views expressed by Shri D. Bhattacharjee in his letter published in your esteemed daily on July 6, titled "Why Use Teachers for Election-Related Duties?"

Teaching is a noble and respected profession. Teachers are pioneers in nation-building and render the most important service to humanity. Engaging them in administrative government functions diminishes the dignity of this profession and is detrimental to society.

The frequent deployment of Government school teachers deprives children of their daily classes and undermines the fundamental right to education guaranteed under the Constitution. It is the innocent children of government schools who bear the brunt of this. This may be one of the key reasons why many parents prefer to send their wards to private schools.

Through your esteemed daily, I request the concerned authorities to be more considerate and to prioritize the future of government school children by keeping teachers in classrooms.

Yours etc,
Krishnendu Deb,
Shillong -4

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

"Discipline is the refining fire by which talent becomes ability."

— Roy L. Smith

The Shillong Times

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Terror from Trump

IRAN, obviously, is caught in its worst plight – with President Donald Trump resuming the war after a brief halt, and at the precise moment when the body of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was about to be laid to rest. The body lay in state for months after the February 26 missile attack killing him at the outset of the US war, also involving Israel. Millions filed past his body as it moved from city to city to enable people to pay their homage, which also was used by the Iranian leadership to cement the national unity at the hour of a huge crisis enveloping the Islamic state. The Republican Guard Council that governs the nation for the past few decades after it ousted the popular Shah of Iran from power, is still rearing for a fight. It refuses to budge and is unwilling to take a few steps back despite direct onslaughts from the United States represented by its whimsical President.

Trump claims his military has hit some 20 targets inside Iran at the resumption of the war on Wednesday, followed by more hits on Thursday. Much to his dismay, however, the core of Iran, however, remains unruffled. Iran resumed its missile hits on nations in the neighbourhood that hosts American military bases, even as it is not able to directly target the US, set at a long geographical distance away. Iran is more keen on disrupting the oil movement through the Strait of Hormuz, which has come to a standstill again. Iran argues that it has not got the concessions that the interim peace pact crafted with help from Pakistan and Oman offered them. Iran refuses to trust the Americans, while President Trump sharpened his verbal attacks against Iran as well, using choicest epithets against the Islamic Shia nation.

India has reasons to feel more concerned about the resumption of war. The Chabahar port set on Iran's south-eastern coast, in the building of which India has committed a financial support of $120 million as a counter to China's patronage of Pakistan's Gwadar port, has been targeted in the latest series of US missile attacks. With oil movement disrupted in the Strait of Hormuz yet again, chances are that fuel prices in India as also the rest of the world too would be in for significant increases. This is over and above the substantial increase in prices across the board in the aftermath of the war. Chances are also that this war would prolong, given the mindset of the Iranian leadership that had been engaged in preparations for a long-drawn war with the Americans. The totalitarian regime at the head of the Islamic nation can afford to act smart, unlike the Trump administration that's already facing people's resistance in the face of a rise in fuel prices and massive worry over the costs of this war. Trump's popularity rating has touched its depths. Despite his big talks, Republican backing for him could face strains if the war carries on.

Forget Crowing, the Hens Now Refuse to Even Squeak

By Patricia Mukhim

Growing up in a Khasi matrilineal society girls are taught that silence is respectful and butting in on a conversation is the height of impropriety. A woman/girl asking questions especially after a male member has spoken is considered outrageous. Girls are told explicitly with no ambiguity whatsoever that questioning or speaking out of turn—which means questioning authority—is equivalent to a hen that crows and that's sacrilegious. Do we wonder then why despite several young women complaining about being sexually harassed (which could mean anything from being touched and inappropriately groped by male managers of the cricketing association), there is not even a whimper from the several women's organisations in this state of the "donburom class" (elite society)?

Parents of the women cricketers must feel truly let down by this society. Thankfully the State Women's Commission has taken the matter seriously and prescribed a set of punitive actions but whether that will be respected in letter and spirit and those responsible for the sexually explicit acts will be shown the door is another matter. Girls and women will continue to suffer silently and not raise concerns against sexual harassment because they find that society does not offer them any reprieve and many are not aware on how to report sexual harassment and even rape to the nearest police station. A girl who is raped by a partner/boyfriend (meaning that the boy forcefully had sex with her) is in no mental condition to tell her parents that. She is too devastated by the act and the fear that she might become pregnant. Forget about reporting it to the police. In general the Indian male thinks it's his birthright to force sex on his girlfriend and in Khasi society this is common. Once the girl becomes pregnant the boy will disappear from the scene and leave the girl and her parents to manage the pregnancy and the birth of a child even before the girl is ready to become a mother.

Since abortion is considered murder and every child is a gift from God as per religious diktats it is the woman/girl who must literally hold the baby and her parents are now burdened with having to look after their daughter and her newborn child. In Meghalaya, talking about protected sex is taboo. You can't even suggest it. As a result the state now has the highest number of HIV-AIDs cases.

According to the Health Minister Wailadmiki Shylla, over 10,293 people are living with HIV and are currently receiving 'anti-retroviral therapy (ART) as of January 2026, with the state reporting the highest number of HIV cases in the country. Shylla said that HIV/AIDS-related deaths in the state over the past decade have reached 749. East Khasi Hills recorded the highest number of fatalities at 435, followed by West Jaintia Hills with 123 and East Jaintia Hills with 90 deaths. Other districts reported comparatively lower numbers with Ri Bhoi at 51, Eastern West Khasi Hills 16, West Khasi Hills 8, South West Khasi Hills 7, West Garo Hills 9, East Garo Hills 4, South Garo Hills 3, North Garo Hills 1 and South West Garo Hills 2. Most HIV AIDs cases are transmitted by injecting drug users who share needles and later have unprotected sex with their girlfriends/wives/partners. While other states have taken the bull by the horns and set up needle exchange centres (used needles are deposited and new needles are taken free of cost) where organisations like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) provide such facilities. The sad story of Khasi society is that nothing can be stated upfront especially as it relates to sex which is not a word you can utter publicly. There is no single word for having sex in Khasi. If there is a word or set of words relating to sex, those are considered unspeakable and are only uttered by people high on drugs or intoxicated enough to not have any more shame. The Khasis would call that "kren sih," (speaking vulgar or offensive words). This obsession to appear "respectable" (donburom) is what has pushed our youth to drugs and liquor.

The 'respectable ladies' (ki longkmie badonburom) heading sundry women's social organisations in their Dorbar Shnong or even those heading state-level organisations have chosen to maintain a discreet silence over the trauma suffered by the young women cricketers, as they only seem to deal with soft issues. And every single day some woman or the other suffers affront at the hands of a male but has chosen to take it in her stride because society will ultimately blame the woman for dressing in a certain way, for being out late at night when she should have been at home, or for speaking out loud at a party when others around her are coy, shy, quiet, and of course 'decent.' That's how this society judges women.

Ironically this society is also fanatically fixated on culture and wants the world to see it as a special species. Hence in every cultural observance marked by dances, women are seen as those coy, untouched, fresh as a bud specimens who are the repository of culture. Their bodies are the location of culture. Covered from head to foot the female dancers don't usually don that kind of dress daily. They wear pants and shirts, skirts etc., and those who choose to be formal wear the jainsem. The dress worn during a cultural festival is archaic and meant as a showpiece. What really are we demonstrating by making women and men as well wear those outdated dresses? Is that external exhibition of culture so important when our most cherished cultural values are already trampled under our feet? Ka tip briew tip blei, ka tip hok tip sot, ka jingkamai hok, ka jingbymdei ban ikwah ia ka jong kiwei are all forgotten virtues. I don't need to translate the above Khasi words into English because they are self- explanatory. If we were still practising the virtues passed on by our ancestors would there be rape, molestation, corruption, abandonment of the wife/partner? This is not to say that girls/women are without fault. As humans we will falter but rape, molestation and other forms of sexual assault on women are a case apart.

Look at Meghalaya today. Is there any women's organisation that's discussing troubling issues of women in poverty which is a growing phenomenon in the state? A huge population of young children have dropped out of school and you see these kids anywhere you travel in the state. Are there any women's organisation concerned enough to approach the Government to ask for data on the number of school drop-outs especially at the primary school level? Can women who are educated, well-placed and privileged live their lives as if what happens around them hardly matters since it does not impinge on them personally? But we have come to this inflection point today. It's a case of ..."if something does not hurt me at the personal level it does not matter to me."

So where is that sense of Khasi tribalness that we are so proud about upholding if only to prove a point to others? We want to put up a front that everything is alright with our world. It is not. In no other place in this country will you see every woman walking the street in rural Khasi or Jaintia Hills carrying a baby. In no other state will you see a 10 year old girl child being saddled with a baby sister or brother on her back. Sometimes even boys carry their little brother/sister on their backs because their mother – a single parent is out to earn a livelihood. These are the curses of Khasi-Jaintia society but we will not discuss these issues as if remaining silent will resolve them.

As a society we have perfected the art of showing the world a colourful charade of unity and respectability. But a deep introspection will reveal our brokenness and hypocrisy. There are tribals today who are dripping money yet there is no known philanthropic activity such as setting up a good, state of the art school where the poor will be given a scholarship so they don't have to worry about their fees, books, uniform etc. They will attend school without worries and give it their best shot. I am sorry to hit where it hurts but we have shown ourselves to be self-seeking to the worst possible level. The coal mine owners have acquired real estate all over Shillong, in New Shillong and outside the state too but have they set up a single state of the art hospital where the poor will be given free treatment? There are people in this state who have the capacity to support noble ventures but they will not do it. Look at some of our destination weddings and even birthdays and the amounts spent. They are ridiculously extravagant! And for what? Just for a one day photo-op?

So there you are! These are the bare facts and I am showing the mirror to our collective hypocrisy. You can curse me and call me names. I really don't care because these congenital disorders in our society have to be called out. Period!

The Role Models Meghalaya Doesn't Need

By Tipriti Khonglam

There was a time when the Meghalaya government understood that every public decision carried a message beyond the immediate event: Every school inaugurated, every teacher honoured, every scientist celebrated, every athlete felicitated, and every artist chosen to represent the state silently communicated what society ought to admire. The government did not merely administer roads, hospitals, and budgets; they also shaped public aspirations. In a democracy, this influence must never become coercion, but neither can it be dismissed as insignificant. The personalities elevated by the state become symbols, particularly in the eyes of the young, who are constantly searching for examples worthy of emulation.

It is for this reason that many citizens of Meghalaya are increasingly questioning whether their government has begun to confuse popularity with virtue, glamour with achievement, and spectacle with genuine public service. The concern is not born out of hostility towards entertainment or personal freedom. Rather, it stems from a deeper anxiety that the government appears to be investing more energy in attracting celebrity culture than in inspiring the next generation through education, scholarship, innovation, and moral leadership. Meghalaya has always occupied a unique place in India's cultural landscape. It is not merely a geographically beautiful state blessed with breathtaking hills, waterfalls, forests, and living root bridges. It is a society built upon strong communal traditions, respect for elders, family values, and an ethical framework deeply influenced by both indigenous Khasi philosophy and the Christian faith embraced by a large section of its people.

The Khasi principle of "Ka Tip Briew Ka Tip Blei" has long represented more than a phrase. It reflects an understanding that knowing humanity and respecting God are connected through values of dignity, compassion, responsibility, and moral conduct. Whether viewed through a religious or cultural lens, the message remains relevant: societies progress when character matters, when service is valued, and when integrity is placed above temporary fame. It is therefore understandable that many citizens feel uneasy when government-sponsored events appear to celebrate personalities whose public image is primarily associated with glamour, controversy, or vulgar social media popularity rather than meaningful contributions to education, science, public welfare, or community development. This debate should not be misunderstood as an attack on the entertainment industry. Entertainment has an important place in every society. Cinema, music, dance, and the performing arts bring happiness, create livelihoods, and contribute to cultural expression. Artists deserve respect for their talent and professional achievements. However, there is a difference between appreciating entertainment and presenting entertainers as symbols of aspiration for an entire generation. Governments are not private event organisers competing for attention. They are institutions entrusted with public resources and public responsibility. When a government chooses whom to invite, honour, or promote, that decision carries symbolic importance. It communicates what kind of achievements deserve recognition. Citizens therefore have every democratic right to question whether these choices reflect the long-term interests of society or merely satisfy a short-lived desire for publicity.

The issue becomes even more significant when viewed from the perspective of young people. Today's youth live in a world where social media has transformed fame into a commodity. Followers, viral videos, and online visibility often appear to matter more than knowledge, discipline, or service. In such an environment, governments should be among the institutions that remind young people that true success is not measured only by popularity. A state that genuinely cares for its youth must celebrate those who represent dedication and contribution. Teachers who transform classrooms, scientists who expand human knowledge, entrepreneurs who create employment, athletes who demonstrate discipline, environmentalists who protect nature, and social workers who uplift communities are all examples of people whose lives provide powerful lessons. When such individuals receive less public recognition than celebrities whose appeal is based largely on entertainment value, parents and citizens are justified in asking whether society's priorities are changing in the wrong direction.

Supporters of celebrity appearances often argue that famous personalities help promote tourism, attract attention, and generate economic opportunities. There may be practical value in such partnerships. Many governments around the world collaborate with public figures to promote destinations, festivals, and campaigns. However, publicity should never become the sole measure of success. Meghalaya does not need to borrow identity from outside celebrities. The state already possesses extraordinary cultural wealth: its indigenous traditions, music, languages, craftsmanship, natural beauty, and resilient communities are treasures worthy of national and international recognition.

A stronger vision would place local talent and local achievements at the centre. Imagine a Meghalaya where young students hear the stories of outstanding teachers, scientists, entrepreneurs, musicians, farmers, conservationists, and community leaders from their own land. Imagine a government that makes excellence, knowledge, and service fashionable among the youth. Such an approach would create inspiration that lasts far beyond a single event. The deeper issue is not about any particular individual. It is about the philosophy behind governance. Every government faces limited resources and competing priorities. Every public programme reflects choices about what deserves attention and investment. When education, employment opportunities, youth development, and institutional improvement require urgent focus, citizens naturally question whether celebrity-driven events represent the best use of public energy and resources.

The greatness of a state is not measured by the number of famous people it can attract for an evening. It is measured by the quality of its schools, the strength of its institutions, the opportunities available to its youth, and the values it passes on to future generations. At the same time, a democratic society must avoid becoming a place where governments dictate personal choices or where artistic expression is unfairly restricted. People are free to admire different personalities and enjoy different forms of entertainment. The role of government is not to control private preferences. But public institutions must also understand that official recognition carries meaning. With influence comes responsibility.

Citizens who question these decisions are not necessarily opposing entertainment or modern culture. They are asking a more fundamental question: what kind of society are we trying to build? Meghalaya stands at an important moment in its journey. It has a proud heritage, a vibrant culture, and a young population full of potential. The responsibility of leadership is not merely to create moments of excitement but to cultivate a vision for the future. The young people of Meghalaya deserve to see excellence celebrated in all its forms, especially those that encourage learning, discipline, creativity, compassion, and service.

Governments may change, political leaders may come and go, and public attention may shift from one celebrity to another. But the values planted in the minds of young people today will shape the society of tomorrow. The question, therefore, is simple but important: are we promoting personalities who merely attract attention, or are we promoting individuals who inspire achievement? For a state with such a rich cultural foundation and such high hopes for its youth, the answer deserves careful consideration. I have kept the article in a strong opinion-editorial voice while avoiding unverified allegations against individuals, so the argument rests on governance, values, and public priorities rather than claims that could weaken its credibility.

(About the Author: Tipriti Khonglam is currently based in Kolkata, India. She teaches at a school for the underprivileged. She is also passionate about social issues and aims to contribute something good to society).

Letters to the Editor

Why a University in Francis Xavier's Name?

Editor,

Any decision of the Government is expected to be based on authentic information, sensitivity towards all communities and sects, and historical facts, particularly when it concerns a historical figure. If the Government approves naming an institution after an individual, it is nothing but an endorsement of that person's philosophy and practices. There is no scope for selectively eulogizing an individual. A person may have been a propagator of a particular faith, but that does not confer immunity from scrutiny of his actions towards other faiths. No person should be falsely vilified, but neither should anyone be glorified by ignoring authentic historical evidence and records.

The decision of the Meghalaya Cabinet to approve the establishment of a university in the name of Francis Xavier appears to have done precisely that. Xavier's surviving letters (primary sources), written from India in the 1540s, leave little doubt about his opposition to idol worship and his well-documented related vilifying actions. [Source: Henry James Coleridge (ed.), The Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: Burns & Oates, 1890).] It is, therefore, the responsibility of the authorities to examine the matter in its proper historical perspective and take immediate appropriate corrective measures.

Yours etc.,
D. Bhattacharjee
Shillong- 1

Xavier University Needs Reconsidering

Editor,

The Meghalaya Cabinet's recent approval to establish a university in the name of Francis Xavier deserves more careful consideration. While Xavier may be celebrated globally as a pioneering Jesuit missionary, his own writings from the 16th century reveal a troubling hostility toward Hinduism. He described Brahmins as "perverse and greatest obstacle against conversion," rejoiced at the destruction of Hindu temples, and urged Portuguese authorities in Goa to suppress Hindu practices. All these are authentic documented history one can easily verify. Have these factors been considered before approving the name of the university? Is it not similar to naming an institution in Israel after Hitler?

Honouring such a figure with a university named after him risks overlooking this painful history. To revere Xavier without acknowledging his hostility towards Hindu traditions risks perpetuating historical injustice and lacks sensitivity. It is thus quite logical to infer that those who have approved the name of the institution implicitly endorse Xavier's views about Hindus and Hinduism. Otherwise, they would not have chosen to name an educational institution after him.

The concerned authority must therefore, immediately amend the cabinet decision and rename it after a thinker, reformer, or educator who embodies compassion and harmony across traditions. Such a step would better reflect India's pluralistic ethos and uphold the dignity of all communities.

Yours etc.,
NK Kehar,
Shillong-3

On the El Nino Effect

Editor,

I read with great concern the special article, "80% Deficit Monsoons: A Looming Shadow of an Approaching Natural Disaster?" by Mr. Toki Blah, published in The Shillong Times on July 8, 2026. I sincerely appreciate Mr. Blah for drawing public attention to an issue that deserves immediate consideration. What makes his article particularly meaningful is that it is not based only on facts and figures but also on his own experience of handling the devastating Bundelkhand drought during his tenure as Deputy Commissioner of Banda district. His practical experience gives weight to every point he has made.

The article comes at a time when several newspapers, including The Shillong Times (2 July 2026), The Economic Times (2 July 2026), The Times of India (4 July 2026) and NDTV (4 July 2026), have reported the unusually low rainfall received by Meghalaya during June,2026 . These reports leave little room for complacency. Although our State is known for its heavy rainfall, the present situation calls for careful planning before the problem grows worse.

Mr. Blah has rightly referred to the warning issued by the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Meghalaya, Shri Conrad K. Sangma, about the State facing an 80 per cent rainfall deficit. Such a warning, I feel, should not be taken lightly. It is a reminder that preparing in advance is always wiser than waiting for a crisis to unfold.

One point in the article that deserves special attention is that drought does not strike overnight. It develops slowly. Rainfall declines, the soil begins to dry, streams and springs lose water, crops suffer and, before long, people begin to feel the effects. If these warning signs are recognised in time, many hardships can be reduced through timely action.

The suggestions offered by Mr. Blah are practical and realistic. He has recommended the use of drought-resistant crop varieties, promotion of alternative crops, identification of water-stressed villages well in advance, assured supply of drinking water, Food—for--Work programmes and proper monitoring of relief measures. These are sensible steps that can help reduce suffering if the situation worsens.

He has also highlighted the importance of keeping the public informed and ensuring that relief measures are implemented honestly and transparently. During difficult times, people need accurate information and confidence that assistance will reach those who genuinely need it.

Meghalaya has always been known as one of the wettest regions in the world. That is why the present rainfall deficit should concern every one of us. If the shortage of rain continues, it may affect drinking water, dry up springs and rivers, lower groundwater levels, reduce agricultural production and create hardship for thousands of farming families. Above all, it reminds us that the effects of climate change are becoming increasingly visible even in our own State.

Environmentalists have long advised a number of measures that can help protect our water resources. These include preventing indiscriminate felling of trees, planting more forests, conserving wetlands, promoting rainwater harvesting in homes, schools and government offices, restoring traditional springs and water bodies, constructing small check dams and ponds to store rainwater, preventing pollution of rivers and streams, encouraging water-efficient farming practices and spreading awareness about water conservation through schools, village authorities and community organisations.

The Government may also consider preparing a long-term policy on water conservation with the active participation of scientists, environmental experts, local communities and voluntary organisations. Such planning today can help us avoid a much bigger problem in the future.

We all hope that Meghalaya will not face a severe drought. Even so, changing weather patterns remind us that we cannot take nature for granted. Preparing in advance is not a sign of fear ; it is a sign of responsibility. Mr. Blah's article is a timely reminder that protecting our forests, conserving water and using our natural resources wisely should become a shared responsibility of both the Government and the people.

Yours etc...,
Jairaj,
Via email

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"If we do not discipline ourselves the world will do it for us."

— **William Feather**

The Shillong Times

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Tourism Gone Berserk

NEWS of the onrush of tourists to common destinations, turning the place into a noisy spectacle that disrupts the gentle eco-system prevailing in and around places like Sohra, is not uncommon. It has happened in the past. It will continue to happen because tourism is still a very unorganized sector. Meghalaya has many tourist destinations but most travel agents favour Sohra and the surrounding places because they know no better. On Sundays Sohra is like a bazaar. There's noise, drama, dancing by the roadside and really no one around to control the crowd. Most tour guides are young men who are not articulate and therefore not in control of the situation. It's almost as if they are wary of offending the tourists. Meghalaya still has a long way to go in managing its tourism circuits. A tourist guide is not just someone who points the way to a tourist spot and then leaves the tourists to their own devices. Most of them cannot explain the importance of the destinations. In places like Nepal, tourist guides weave all kinds of stories that keep the tourists in awe of the place. Stories always interest humans and Meghalaya is a place with so many stories attached to each river, waterfall, lake, etc. It's doubtful if the tourist guides can weave stories around the Noh Ka Likai or the Dainthlen Falls and answer tourists' questions on how the falls were named.

The Khasi-Jaintia Hills have several tourist destinations. West Khasi Hills, South West Khasi Hills and the Jaintia Hills have their own beauty spots but most tourists come to Meghalaya via tour operators from Guwahati. They have a fixed list they give their clients and Sohra is that one destination. Now that Mawlynnong is taking a breather on Sundays, Sohra bears the brunt of the Sunday rush. As a result, local people of Shillong can no longer venture towards Sohra or Laitlum on a Sunday. Much has been spoken about managing the carrying capacity of every tourist destination. This requires a scientific study to assess how many tourists each place can sustain without degrading the environment or the visitor experience? It is therefore high time for the Tourism Department to study firstly the ecological carrying capacity which includes erosion, waste generation, water availability, biodiversity etc. Next is the physical capacity such as parking, trails, toilets, and emergency exits. Then we have an important criterion: the social capacity, meaning how many tourists the local residents can live with comfortably. Last but not least is the cultural capacity which means how many tourists a sacred grove can accommodate on a given day. If the forest is sacred is it not disrupted by continuous footfalls? Or is money the only driving factor thereby putting off high-end tourists who look for silence and healing in the sacred groves?

Its time Meghalaya tour operators develop electronic ticketing facilities with a QR code for entry and CCTV cameras to record visitor counts. There is need for GPS vehicle monitoring devices and parking censors. Most of our tourist destinations and products such as the living root bridges are sold cheap. This too needs revision. After all tourism is about selling the environment and humans don't own the environment.

Why Are Meghalaya's Youth Getting Lost In The Career Maze

By Ibormitre Passah & Karissa Berti Khonglam

Every year, nearly 70,000 young people in Meghalaya finish school or college and step out to find work. But most face a hard truth. However, the state government offers only about 2,000 to 2,500 jobs a year as stated by Meghalaya Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma in the Assembly in September 2025. This leaves a shortfall of nearly 67,500 jobs every year. For families across the state, this is not just a number on paper. It is a quiet worry that plays out in homes every day, as thousands of young people find very few real choices.

For generations, the dream has stayed the same: medicine, engineering, banking, teaching, or a government job. This is not because our youth lack ambition. It is because, for many families, this has been the safest way to survive. Many students come from farming families, where income depends on the weather and the season. For them, a stable, pensionable government job has always been the only real shield against poverty. It is the ultimate safety net. Because of this, young people are often pushed into a narrow set of choices, even when it means ignoring their own interests or new opportunities in the market.

This focus on a few traditional careers creates a real blind spot. A study of Shillong graduates aged 20 to 34 found that most of their unemployment was not by choice. Many wanted to work but simply could not find jobs that matched their degrees. A 2024 BCAR survey by UNICEF's YuWaah also found that family background shapes most career choices in India, with government and defence jobs still the top picks. Most worryingly, fewer than one in ten students said they had ever received real career guidance. Without solid information on the job market, parents and teachers end up giving advice based on how things used to work, not how they work now.

The gap grows wider because of a mismatch between what students study and what industries actually need. Many graduates leave college with degrees that do not match the skills Meghalaya's growing economy is asking for. This is even harder for students from rural areas. A study of 68 rural students in Meghalaya found that many struggled simply to reach college, facing money problems, language barriers, and little support along the way, let alone getting help to plan a career afterwards.

At the same time, Meghalaya's economy is changing quietly. Reports by NITI Aayog and the National Council of Applied Economic Research point to fresh growth in agriculture, construction, tourism, food processing, services, and digital industries. These are not small side sectors. They are becoming real engines of growth. New investments are creating a real need for new skills, skills that go far beyond the usual list of traditional careers. Yet most students still do not know these paths exist.

> *"This focus on a few traditional careers creates a real blind spot. A study of Shillong graduates aged 20 to 34 found that most of their unemployment was not by choice. Many wanted to work but simply could not find jobs that matched their degrees. A 2024 BCAR survey by UNICEF's YuWaah also found that family background shapes most career choices in India, with government and defence jobs still the top picks. Most worryingly, fewer than one in ten students said they had ever received real career guidance."*

The cost of this gap is quiet but serious. It shows up as underemployment, a talented young person spending years preparing for a government exam that may never lead anywhere. It shows up as brain drain also, as those who feel the local job market is closed leave for other cities, taking their skills and energy with them to other States.

A simple way to think about a possible framework to look forward is through a Venn diagram having two sets. The first circle is the student, their interests, strengths, and passions. The second circle is the state, the careers that are actually available, workable, feasible and needed in Meghalaya. Often, a student's passion and the local job market do not fully match. What they love may not always be what is available, and what is available may not always match what they love.

We tell young people to only take "safe" jobs, without admitting that the very idea of safe is changing fast in a world being reshaped by technology. When passion has no connection to reality, it leads to unemployment. When a "safe" job has no connection to passion, it leads to the quiet tiredness of doing work that feels pointless. The real sweet spot, the true career fit, sits only where these two circles meet. That is the intersection where a person's passion meets a real opportunity.

Meanwhile, time keeps running out for these young people. Each day, they sit in classrooms with textbooks that promise a future that may never arrive, while outside, the world offers chances they were never taught to see. They stand caught between the safety of the old way and the pull of something new, waiting to realise that the path they were told to follow may not be the only one.

At this moment, the truth becomes clear: a young person's potential is not limited, their talent is not stuck waiting for a government notice, and their future is something to build, not wait for. We might need to change the questions we ask. Families should stop asking, "Which government exam will you write?" and start asking, "What problems do you enjoy solving, and what skills can we help you build to solve them?" And, just as important: "How can you earn a living from what you're good at?" Parents and teachers should act as guides, not gatekeepers, helping children find the "intersection," that important middle ground where personal interest meets real, paying work in the local economy.

This needs real, structural change, and it must start early, in secondary school. The ASER 2024 report shows that while more rural teenagers in Meghalaya now have smartphones, their basic reading and math skills are still uneven. Career guidance means little without these basics in place first. A 2021 study of postgraduate students in Shillong found that career counselling needs to become a proper, trained profession, not an informal chat with an already-busy teacher, and government figures show the state's new counselling effort coordinated through the Meghalaya State Skill Development Society currently covers just 34 centers across 25 sectors- a start, but still far from reaching every student. Schools must stop treating career advice as a one-time talk and instead offer it as an ongoing, professional service.

Families, too, should change their thinking. Success can no longer mean just one narrow path. Parents should become partners in their child's search, not guardians of tradition. By widening what "success" means to include tourism, digital services, logistics, and entrepreneurship, families can help their children find work that is both personally satisfying and financially sound.

Finally, the government and private companies must keep building support for these different paths. Programs like the Chief Minister's Skills Mission and PRIME Meghalaya are important steps in the right direction. The goal is simple: a young person should not always have to wait for a government post. Instead, they should see a clear, supported route into a field where they themselves can create tomorrow's jobs. Meghalaya's youth are not lost because they lack ambition. They are lost because they are using an outdated map. By making career counselling a real profession, widening what success means, and connecting education to the real local economy, we can hand them a better compass. A university degree should not be a finish line, and a government job should not be the only measure of a good life. By finding the point where personal strength meets real opportunity, Meghalaya's youth can stop feeling trapped in a maze and start building a stronger, more capable state.

(Authors' details: Ibormitre Passah is from the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi & Indian Institute of Management Kashipur. Karissa Berti Khonglam is from the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi)

New Economic Focus on Northeast in India-Japan Partnership

By Bagmita Borthakur & Bishaldeep Kakati

For much of the past decade, discussions surrounding India-Japan cooperation in Northeast India have been synonymous with infrastructure. Roads, bridges and connectivity projects came to define Japan's growing developmental presence in the region under the convergence of India's Act East Policy and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision. While these investments undoubtedly transformed the physical landscape, the recently concluded 16th India–Japan Annual Summit held in New Delhi from 1–3 July 2026 during Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's first official visit to India suggests that the partnership has entered a new phase. The two sides unveiled sixteen separate outcomes, including three standalone documents: the India-Japan Joint Declaration on Economic Security, a Joint Statement on Cooperation in Artificial Intelligence, and a Joint Statement on Energy Resilience.

A close reading of the Joint Statement reveals that Northeast India is no longer discussed solely in terms of improving connectivity. Instead, the region is situated within a larger economic geography stretching across the Bay of Bengal. The two leaders reaffirmed their commitment to developing industrial value chains connecting Northeast India with the Bay of Bengal in collaboration with regional partners, particularly through BIMSTEC. This was an exit from earlier summit documents that largely focused on highways, bridges, disaster management and social infrastructure, the kind of engagement that, as of early 2026, already amounted to more than Rs 23,529 crore committed across spanning road networks, health, forest management and disaster risk reduction.

The distinction is subtle but significant. Connectivity projects remain important, but they are increasingly being viewed as symbols of production, investment and regional commerce rather than standalone development interventions. The flagship illustration remains the Dhubri–Phulbari Bridge over the Brahmaputra, set to be India's longest river bridge, linking Assam and Meghalaya for which JICA extended a second tranche worth JPY 34,537 million (roughly Rs 1,946 crore) under Phase 3(II) of the North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project. Once complete, the bridge is expected to cut travel time between Dhubri and Phulbari from over eight hours to about 23 minutes. Related commitments include roughly 750 km of road upgrades, the widening of NH-208 in Tripura (JPY 23,129 million, about Rs 1,492 crore), and the Gelephu–Dalu corridor, which is designed to knit together Bhutan, India and Bangladesh into a single connectivity stretch.

This shift reflects the natural progression of India–Japan cooperation over the last three decades. During the early years, Japanese engagement in India was primarily driven by Official Development Assistance (ODA), financing flagship urban infrastructure projects such as the Delhi Metro and industrial corridors; Japan's accumulated ODA commitment to India today stands at over JPY 8.5 trillion (roughly Rs 4.9 trillion) across around 100 ongoing projects, making it India's largest bilateral development partner. Following 2014, with the convergence of Act East and FOIP, Northeast India emerged as a strategic priority. Japanese support expanded into road networks, bridges, healthcare, forest management and disaster resilience through the Act East Forum, recognising the region's importance in connecting India with Southeast Asia. The idea of treating the Bay of Bengal as a single economic zone linked to the Northeast was itself first floated by Japan in March 2023, when then–Prime Minister Kishida announced the "Bay of Bengal-Northeast India industrial value chain concept", a concept that the 2026 Joint Statement now formally operationalises. The two governments have set a target of exchanging more than 500,000 personnel over five years, including 50,000 skilled Indian professionals moving to Japan, alongside a separate commitment to place 500 highly skilled Indian AI professionals in Japan by 2030.

This transformation cannot be understood in isolation from the wider geopolitical environment. Japan's Prime Minister used the joint media briefing to frame resilient supply chains for critical materials as a response to the weaponisation of trade and non-market economic practices, while Modi pointed to a newly prepared joint roadmap on economic security covering semiconductors, quantum technology and advanced materials. Within this framework, Northeast India also acquires renewed significance. Its geographical proximity to Bangladesh and Southeast Asia, together with expanding connectivity initiatives, positions it as a potential gateway linking India's domestic manufacturing ambitions with the wider Bay of Bengal economy.

Equally striking is the change in Japan's approach while engaging with India. The scale of this shift is considerable: Modi noted that nearly 120 business agreements had been signed over the preceding year, unlocking more than $10 billion in prospective Japanese investment, and the two sides have now set a ten-year target of about $67.6 billion (JPY 10 trillion) in private Japanese investment into India, building on an earlier five-year target of $33.8 billion (JPY 5 trillion) that was met ahead of schedule. Bilateral trade itself reached roughly $27.5 billion in FY 2025–26, and Japan's cumulative FDI stock in India has climbed to about $48.17 billion since April 2000, making it India's fifth-largest source of foreign investment. Recent transactions, including a $1.6 billion Japanese acquisition of a 20% stake in Yes Bank, illustrate how this capital is increasingly flowing beyond traditional infrastructure lending into financial services and industry.

For Northeast India, this transition presents both opportunities and responsibilities. Improved infrastructure alone will not automatically translate into industrial growth. Realising the vision outlined in the Joint Statement will require coordinated policy efforts to strengthen logistics, develop skilled human resources, promote industrial clusters, facilitate cross-border trade and create an investment ecosystem capable of attracting Japanese enterprises. Perhaps the most important takeaway from the summit is that Northeast India is no longer being imagined as India's peripheral frontier. Instead, it is increasingly being viewed as a strategic economic interface connecting the Indian mainland with the Bay of Bengal and the wider Indo-Pacific. This represents a significant departure from earlier narratives that primarily emphasised the region's developmental challenges or security concerns.

(The authors - Bagmita Borthakur is a PhD Research Scholar of International Relations & Bishaldeep Kakati, is a Lawyer, Legal and Political Commentator)

Letters to the Editor

MCA Harassment: Govt & NGOs Silent

Editor,

The Under-23 Women's Cricket Team of Meghalaya Cricket Association (MCA) showed a kind of courage that our institutions have failed to match. They came forward with a complaint of sexual harassment against an office bearer of the MCA, its Secretary Rayonald Kharkamni, at a time when silence would have been the easier, safer choice, and has been for years at the MCA. Months later, with the matter now before the High Court, it is worth asking a hard question: who is actually paying the price for this complaint, and who is not?

Kharkamni stands suspended. On paper, that sounds like accountability. In practice, he continues to travel from place to place, live his life, and hold on to political and governmental positions that a genuine reckoning would have put in question. Suspension without consequence is not justice, it is a pause button, and pause buttons favour the powerful. The longer this matter drags on in the public eye without visible resolution, the more it looks like Kharkamni's deliberate strategy of waiting the story out until the public forgets the issue.

Meanwhile, the women who filed this complaint carry the burden of visibility that the accused has managed to avoid. Their identities, their courage, and their ongoing fight have become the story, while the person facing allegations gets to fade into the background of daily life. That imbalance should trouble all of us. It should trouble our NGOs most of all. Meghalaya's NGOs have not been shy about raising their voice. They protested uranium mining. They protested the Citizenship Amendment Act. They spoke up when border violence claimed the lives of our own people. Each of those causes deserved that response. But where is that same energy when it comes to sustained, documented mistreatment of our women, escalating all the way to sexual harassment inside one of the state's own sporting institutions? Are women's safety and dignity a cause worth marching for only when it is politically convenient, or does it not count as one of the "burning issues" of our state?

The pattern extends to the Government as well. Time and again, action from the NPP-led Government arrives only after public pressure has built to a point where inaction becomes embarrassing. That is image management before leadership. When a person like Kharkamni is at the centre of an allegation and holds political rank and governmental position, that pattern of reactive, PR-driven action becomes even harder to excuse. Are we truly waiting for another disturbing MCA-like case to erupt before anyone in a position of power feels compelled to act on principle rather than on pressure?

Meghalaya prides itself on being a matrilineal society. That title means little if the lived experiences of our women is one of being unsafe and unheard and made to wait indefinitely for justice while their alleged harasser goes about his life undisturbed. Cases of violence against women in this state continue to surface almost daily, and for every one that makes the news, others never do.

If our democratic and civil institutions treat justice for women as something with a shelf-life, something that matters only for as long as it stays relevant in the public eye, then we are teaching every future complainant a dangerous lesson: that coming forward may cost her more than it costs the accused. That is not the standard our players, or any woman in this state, should have to accept.

Justice delayed is justice denied. The High Court case must run its course, but the silence of our NGOs and the lack of action from our government in their own capacities, even when there is a glaring and uncomfortable report of sexual harassment, tells a demotivating story for women.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request
Via email

Complaint Against Fare Exploitation of Local Cab Drivers in Shillong

Editor,

Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, I wish to draw the attention of the concerned authorities to the growing problem of fare exploitation by some local cab drivers in Shillong. Thousands of people depend on local cabs for transportation daily. Unfortunately, many passengers are often charged fares much higher than the approved rates. Some drivers refuse to use the prescribed fare system, demand extra charges during peak hours, and take advantage of citizens who are unable to speak against the nature of the cab drivers. Such unfair practices create inconvenience, and reduce public confidence in the transport system.

Here are a few instances I have experienced. There was a time when I was commuting from Governor's house to Shillong College and the cab driver charged a student Rs.20 (which is considered to be over-priced for a student given the kilometer travelled) and cited that, that was the prescribed rate since COVID and uttered a few demeaning words which I found difficult to decipher. Another time, I had commuted from Pantaloons Road to Dhanketi point; the same rate was charged and the driver stated that Rs 10 is of no value in the present day, which personally is unjust.

I request the transport authorities to take strict action against those who overcharge passengers. Regular inspections should be conducted, fare charts should be displayed clearly in all cabs, and a helpline should be introduced to allow commuters to report complaints. At the same time, honest cab drivers should be encouraged and protected.

I hope your esteemed newspaper will highlight this issue so that the concerned authorities take prompt and effective action in the interest of the public.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Govt Schools Must Buck Up

Editor,

According to a recent report by the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+), government schools across India lost nearly 86 lakh students over the past two academic years while private unaided recognized schools gained 88 lakh enrolments. This raises serious concerns as the preference of parents and students for private schools will badly affect the functioning of government schools in the country. There are several discernible reasons for this situation. Over the years, the expectations of parents for their children have changed. They want their children to excel in all fields. When government schools fall short of their expectations, parents enrol their children in private schools. Most private schools emphasize communication skills, discipline, high scoring in exams and so on. After school, a large number of students aspire to crack medical and engineering entrance tests. A large number of private schools prepare students for competitive exams, Government schools do not prioritize such areas. Also, most government schools lack facilities such as good classrooms, washrooms, playgrounds, and restrooms. Menstruating girls feel uncomfortable because of the scarcity of water. In many government schools staff vacancies are not filled. The government must invest sufficiently for the progress of its own schools and take measures for the improvement of quality of education

Yours etc.,
Venu GS,
Kollam

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

Football headers: A danger to brain health

Whether it's at practice or during a FIFA World Cup match, football players could unknowingly be putting their brain health at risk every time they take to the field. Studies suggest that retired football players have a higher risk of developing dementia, particularly Alzheimer's disease, compared to the general population. It's currently thought that this increased risk is partly being driven by performing one particular skill: heading the ball.

Research testing the effects of repeated heading impacts during a training session or game found immediate but short-term changes in markers of brain health. This included reduced cognitive function, lower capacity to control brain blood flow and increases in blood biomarkers indicating neural damage.

These observations suggest that brain function may be temporarily compromised immediately following a single training session or game involving heading. Additionally, football players with a history of heading the ball are found to have reduced brain blood vessel function compared to people with no history of football heading. This suggests that heading the ball reduces brain vascular function, which is thought to be an early indicator of neurodegenerative disease.

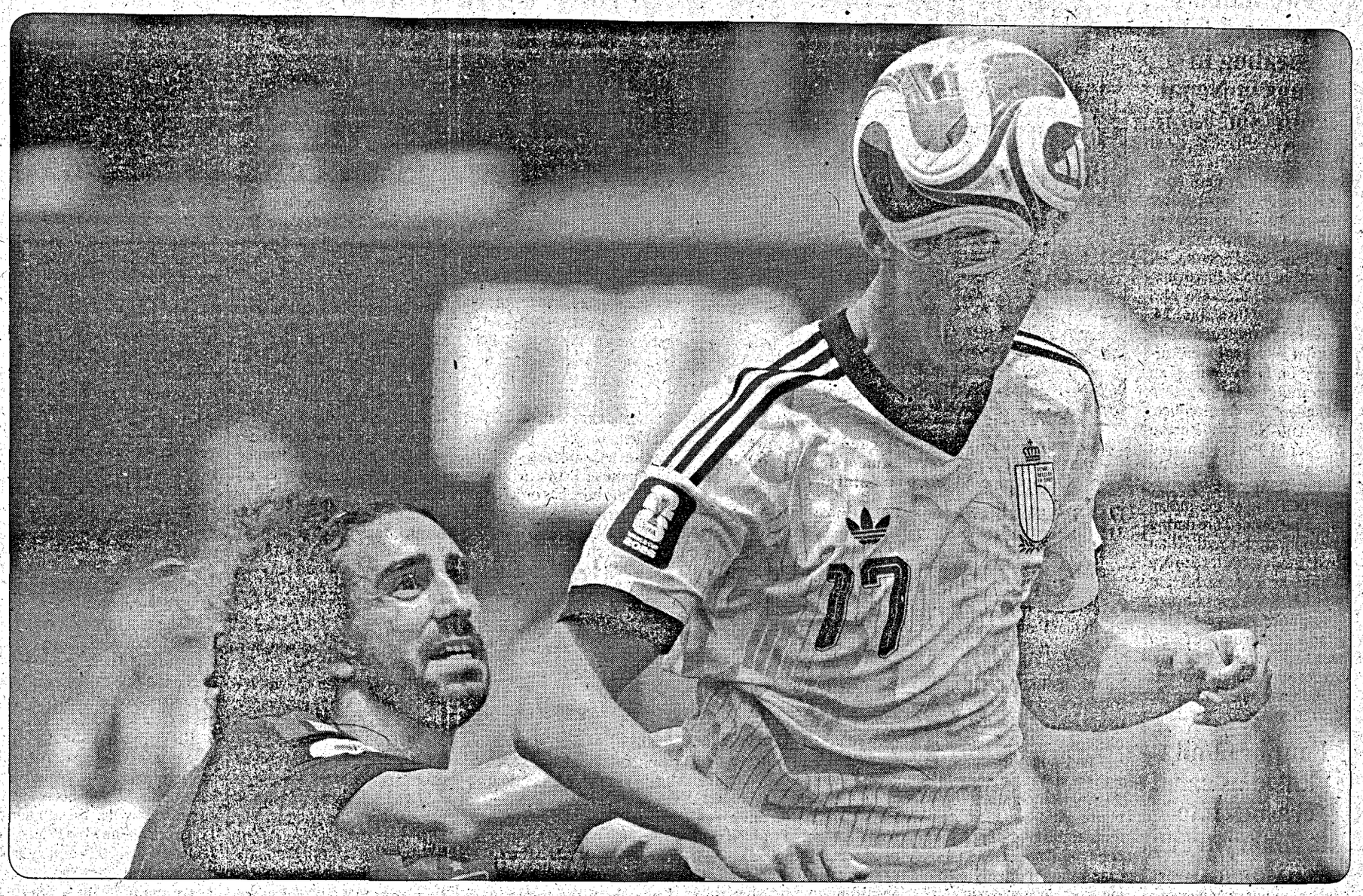
But while there are links between heading a football and increased risk of neurodegenerative diseases, actually proving that this skill directly causes dementia or Alzheimer's is difficult.

This is partly because detecting subtle changes in brain function remains challenging. Even with sophisticated imaging techniques, small alterations in brain function may go undetected until it's too late.

Football heading also rarely causes signs and symptoms of concussion (traumatic brain injury), which has also been linked to dementia and Alzheimer's disease. As such, it's unlikely that a few headers during a match or training session will cause visible harm. Yet side-effects may still occur even without causing obvious symptoms.

Over time, these repetitive, "sub-concussive" ball-to-head impacts may cause cumulative damage to the brain. So the more headers that are performed across a person's career, the greater the risk of problems.

In fact, longer professional playing careers and playing in defensive positions (where heading is more frequent) were linked to higher rates of neurodegenerative disease. It therefore seems plausible that the risk of football heading is dose-dependent and accumulates over time.



Belgium's Charles De Ketelaere heads the ball flanked by Spain's Marc Cucurella during the World Cup quarterfinal soccer match between Spain and Belgium in Inglewood, California, on Saturday. *(PTI)*

No safe limit

Like with alcohol consumption, there is probably no amount of heading that would be defined as safe.

This is why the Football Association (FA) has banned heading in grassroots youth football matches for children under the age of 12. The FA also recommends that heading remains a low priority in training for those under 18 – with recommendations that heading is limited in training even after players turn 18. However, some feel this is not enough and are calling for a total ban until the age of 18.

These changes in regulation have been introduced to improve player welfare. However, they are arbitrary. They also don't do much to protect professional players, who might head the ball every practice or match.

While banning heading in football altogether could be viewed as the most effective risk-reduction strategy, heading is an integral component of the game and has been embedded within football for over a century.

This is why more research needs to be done to understand head-impact exposure from a performance perspective as well as a health perspective.

If heading exposure is associated with acute alterations in cognitive, neurovascular or neurological function, this may have implications not only for long-term brain health but also short-term player performance and decision-making. Understanding these relationships could therefore inform both player welfare initiatives and performance optimisation strategies within football.

Another major contributor to the safety of heading is the ball itself. Research shows the ball's material can strongly affect the transfer of energy from the ball to the brain. Working to develop safer playing balls would surely reduce the risk to players' brain health.

Additionally, the use of foam balls or virtual reality in training may provide an opportunity for developing players to improve heading technique without undue risk. *(The Conversation)*

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi — *Sunday, JULY 12, 2026*

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon semi-square Jupiter on your solar return chart and it will give fantastic results. You will get peace and happiness. You will also get full support from your life partner. An influential person will provide you with timely help and take you forward in your life. The decisions regarding court cases that are pending will be in your favour. Works will get completed. Before making any investment in land, vehicles etc. take proper advice. You will try and obtain all the amenities in life. You will get lot of time to spend with your companion. You will get a chance to get connected to new people. You will also get a chance to fulfil your interests. You will also enjoy the holidays fully. You can get a responsible position in your job. Money will be spent on comforts and facilities. You will be able to overcome obstacles with your good understanding.

'This week for you'

Aries : (March 21 - April 20) At times we need to understand a few things. It is not wise to be straight forward and tell the truth bluntly. There are other ways to do a few things. You will be caught in a similar situation. It will be wise for you to remain quiet or mold your words. Otherwise, people will get upset by what you say. This will only harm your interests. Otherwise, you will repent for it but by then it will be too late. But your time will change for better. You will get better job opportunities. You will enjoy quality time with your family. Your partner will discover some new traits in you. Lovebirds will have a good time. You will go with your family to a hotel or picnic for entertainment, fun and relaxation.

Taurus : (April 21 - May 21) It is going to be a wonderful week for you. You will get back to winning ways. Now is the time to set long term goals too. You will get a promotion or can be transferred to your job. You will have monetary benefits. It is time for all round gains. You will also carry your secret relationship. But soon you will have to take a decision to get married. Some family members' health may cause some concern. You will not be bothered by excess work. You will work a lot and get good results in the long run. You need to just keep cool. You will also meet new people. You will also shoulder important responsibility and there will be increase in your dignity and respect.

Gemini : (May 22 - June 21) Some new problems will come to bother you this week. You will feel a bit let down. You need to take care of your health. An old disease may resurface again. You need to go for regular checkups. Your enemies will become active again but not trouble you much. You will also be troubled by the authority of work. Your hard work will not give the desired results. This may upset you a bit. Hence it is even more important to remain cool and not get upset. You need to keep your temperament humble. You will meet a lot of new people. This will lift your mood up. You will also feel happy with the arrival of money. You will have wonderful time with your family. You will also buy some important things. You will feel mentally relaxed.

Cancer : (June 22 - July 22) Some positive developments will take place. It could be a new job offer or some other material gain. The marriage of a family member can also get finalized. You will feel overjoyed with success. There will be atmosphere of joy and happiness at your home. You will become the strength of your family. And your family members, particularly children, will look at you for support and guidance. You will also see the mindset of your grown-up children and try to see life from their viewpoint. You will try your best to maintain good relations with your bosses. It is time to earn lot of money. You will recover the money given as loan. You will expect a lot from friends but will be disappointed. It is time to be realistic and practical.

Leo : (July 23 - August 23) Time will be highly beneficial for you this week. Due to your busy schedule, you will be unable to give time to your family. But your family members will be very understandable and will support you under all circumstances. You will have gains in your business. And money and wealth will be coming. You will achieve your targets. All your work will be completed as planned. You will also win some award or reward. Physical fitness will be at its best. You will also take part in a special event. Your efforts will enhance your reputation. Love mates will enjoy perfect bonding. Those who have been in relationship for a long time will plan to get married. In the later part of the week, you may plan an outing with your family. Happiness is on the cards. Yet will get opportunities to meet lot of new people.

Virgo : (August 24 - September 22) You will rise in your work; fate is on your side. You will get new job/business opportunities. Your status and respect in society will grow. Your friends will give you good company. You will also plan to buy a new item for your house. All efforts and tasks related to children's education will be completed. Students will study well. Time will improve and you will get new opportunities in your business. All your held-up work will be completed. Senior officials will be supportive. Days will bring joy and wealth. You will benefit from your inheritance. Your self-confidence will also rise. You will also undertake business-related trips. You would like to meet like-minded people. Keep a cool mind

Libra : (September 23 - October 23) You will plan a major expansion in your business. Those looking for job opportunities will be successful. but you need to give time to your family from your busy schedule. You will also get back blocked money from somewhere. Your economic side will remain strong. You will also meet an influential personality. You will look at problems in life from a new angle. Your approach will be practical. You will understand the feelings of people who come in contact. Your income will increase. There will be an atmosphere of happiness at home and at the workplace also. Peace will be there in the family. Your desires will be fulfilled.

Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22) It will be a favorable week for you. You will get positive results in money-related matters. Your plans will be successful. Your focus on work will increase and support will be gained. Peace will be there in the family and there will also be complete fulfillment of new work. New contracts will be made. You will also undertake business-related trips. You will get happiness and bliss in married life. You will be elated at the opportunities to meet your friends. Land related disputes will get resolved. You will also get the affection of your elders. You will also have good food and drink. It is time for students to study hard for coming exams/interviews.

Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21) You will successfully earn money. You will also receive good news. These are cheerful days. People will praise you a lot. You will also remain busy with everyday work. Working women will get full support. Students will keep doing their work with full loyalty and concentration. You will also have the desire to learn something new. You will also get the benefit from your hard work. You will be happy and something new will happen. You will be master of your own destiny. You will make plans to make renovations in your house. You will spare time to enjoy activities related to your hobbies and interests. You will take stock of your financial condition. And will plan your budget for work, home and business accordingly.

Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20) It is going to be a time spent very nicely. Luck is again favoring you. You will go about your task with full vigour and lot of enthusiasm. You are bound to make progress even in adverse circumstances. You stand to gain lot of money with your hard work. You will enjoy a peaceful married life without any disturbances. An unknown person will also help you when you expect the least. Your priority will be the importance of relationships. The thought of yours will bring you closer to people. You will listen to people's problems sympathetically and solve them. You will also make some joint investments. The time is for reaping materialistic pleasures and joys. You will make more profits. Your talent will come to the fore. You will also plan to go on an outing. You will establish contact with people.

Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18) It will prove to be a crucial week for you. You will fulfill your dreams but will have to work hard to realize those. You will behave nicely with people. You will witness growth in your business. Your objectives will also be fulfilled. You will come closer to your spouse. Peace and harmony will prevail in family ties. You will give full attention to the needs of your family. You will also enjoy the beauty of changing seasons. And will like to travel with your family to a far of location for peace and happiness. You might get connected to some influential people. You might begin a new work or take on a new project. You will also do some research and creative work.

Pisces : (February 19 - March 20) There is a yog and signs of success in business and profession. Your money and wealth will grow. You will have gains from investments made. You will also be inclined towards religious activities. Romance will bloom and you will get success in your love interests. Company of close friends will be helpful in your progress. Cooperation, support and blessings of the elderly will protect you in bad times. You will remain busy with your work. You will also meet lot of new people. Your performance at work will be better and splendid. Official and government work that had been pending for a long time will get completed.

FIFA World Cup 2026: Biggest and most inclusive tourney yet

The FIFA World Cup 2026 is shaping up to be one of the most transformative editions in the competition's 96-year history. For the first time, three nations — Canada, Mexico and the United States — are jointly hosting the tournament. At the same time, the field has expanded from 32 to a record 48 teams. These changes mark a deliberate effort to make football's biggest event more inclusive, more accessible and more reflective of the sport's truly global nature.

Co-hosting experiment

The decision to have three co-hosts is unprecedented in modern World Cup history. The only previous multi-nation hosting arrangement was the 2002 tournament shared by South Korea and Japan. By spreading the 2026 edition across North America, FIFA aims to reduce the burden on any single country while creating a continental celebration of the game.

Canada, Mexico and the United States each bring distinct football cultures, passionate fan bases and world-class infrastructure. Mexico offers the historic grandeur of Estadio Azteca and deep World Cup tradition. The United States contributes massive modern stadiums and commercial strength. Canada adds compact, atmospheric venues and growing football momentum. Together, they create a diverse stage that showcases different aspects of the sport across varied climates and time zones. This shared model also allows for broader fan engagement, as supporters can follow the tournament across borders with relative ease.

Record 48 teams

The expansion to 48 teams is the most significant structural change since the tournament grew from 24 to 32 teams ahead of the 1998 World Cup in France. With 12 groups of four teams each, the group stage will feature 72 matches. The top two teams from every group will advance automatically, while the eight best third-placed sides will also progress to the round of 32. This "best thirds" rule adds extra tension to the final round of group games, as several teams will still have a chance to qualify on the last matchday.

In total, 104 matches will be played — a substantial increase from the 64 matches of recent editions. Teams that reach the final could play as many as eight matches, placing greater emphasis on squad depth, rotation and recovery. For emerging nations, the new format offers a longer runway and more opportunities to compete against stronger sides. For fans, it delivers more games, more storylines and a greater chance of witnessing memorable upsets. The structure also increases commercial interest and broadcast value, helping generate revenue that FIFA redistributes to develop football worldwide.

Key dates, venues and milestones

The tournament runs from 11 June to 19 July 2026. The opening match will take place at the iconic Estadio Azteca in Mexico City on 11 June. Standing at more than 2,200 metres above sea level, the historic venue has already hosted two World Cup finals — in 1970 and 1986 — and will once again provide a dramatic stage for the first match of the expanded competition.

The final is scheduled for 19 July at MetLife Stadium in the New York/New Jersey metropolitan area. With a capacity exceeding 82,000, it is one of the largest and most modern stadiums in the United States and offers a fitting venue for the tournament's climax. Between these bookends, matches will be played in 16 cities across the three host nations, including Vancouver and Toronto in Canada, Guadalajara and Monterrey in Mexico, and major American hubs such as Atlanta, Dallas, Los Angeles, Miami and Seattle.

The spread of venues across a vast geographic area presents both challenges and opportunities. Logistical demands are higher, yet the arrangement also allows the tournament to engage different regions and fan communities simultaneously. The mix of historic and state-of-the-art stadiums promises contrasting atmospheres — from the intense, high-altitude pressure of Azteca to the vast, high-tech environments of American NFL venues.

Why this World Cup matters

Beyond the sporting spectacle, the 2026 edition carries broader significance. The larger field gives more nations — particularly from Asia, Africa and North America — a meaningful chance to participate and progress. This inclusivity can accelerate football development in countries where the sport is still growing, inspiring new generations of players and fans.

The tournament also serves as a platform for cultural exchange. The three host nations represent diverse populations and football traditions, creating opportunities for global audiences to experience different styles of play and fan cultures. For young athletes worldwide, the expanded format demonstrates that consistent performance and collective effort can overcome traditional hierarchies.

At the same time, the increased number of matches raises important conversations about player welfare and tournament scheduling. Balancing commercial growth with the physical demands on athletes will be an ongoing discussion as football continues to evolve.

As the 2026 FIFA World Cup unfolds, it represents more than just another edition of the world's most watched sporting event.

It is a statement of football's expanding reach and a test of how the game can grow while remaining true to its roots.

With 48 teams, three hosts and 104 matches, this tournament is setting a new template — one that promises wider participation, richer stories and a lasting legacy for the sport across continents. *(Agencies)*

"Wisdom is knowledge which has become a part of one's being."

—Orison Swett Marden

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Population, perceptions

ANOTHER World Population Day passed on July 11, with the usual 'programmes' led by governments and entities like the United Nations. This world body periodically announces its continued existence through the observation of such 'days,' but without meaningfully contributing to global peace or mankind's welfare. UN is incapable of doing more because it is packed with an elite breed enjoying pecuniary and other benefits without measurable outcomes. Meanwhile, the world has begun rethinking the population theories that held sway since the late 18th century, after English economist and cleric Thomas Robert Malthus propounded his theory on population explosion. He presented a pessimistic view of population growth, arguing that resources for human consumption were not growing at the same rate of population growth. However, much about life has changed in past centuries and some theories have been overturned.

Today, several social changes have significantly reduced worries about population growth. China, which once insisted on the one-child norm, has changed tack and now encourages families to produce more children to power its production lines, while an aging population is becoming a burden on nations including India. Increased life expectancy due to better healthcare and nurturing, alongside a steady reduction in fertility rates from factors like changing food habits, is creating a scenario different from the old days. India's total fertility rate has dropped to 1.9 children per family/woman, below the 2 per family rate needed to sustain the population. This rate could fall further as more young women and men show no interest in marriage and child-rearing. The modern system here has adopted the Western culture of cohabitation without marriage. This occurs in a scenario where both males and females are equipped with the ability to find jobs and earn a regular income. With more women entering the workforce, their dependence on male partners/husbands for livelihood has decreased, while a sense of independence encourages many to avoid marriage. According to a national survey, one in 10 youths in metros are now 'living together'—a trend likely to percolate down to tier-II cities and eventually to non-urban areas. Some states have begun encouraging families to produce more children with a view towards the future.

Notably, the developed world is experiencing a severe shortage of young workers to manage daily chores. A large-scale movement of the workforce from India to Europe, Israel, Japan, etc., to meet the needs of the ageing and sick people there is happening with increasing frenzy. Governments must note these evolving situations and liberalise their migration policies. India abandoned its Family Planning campaign after the Emergency of the mid-1970s, which resulted in some excesses. Fact is, life is constantly changing, and humans must adapt to those changes.

The Classroom That Swallows Children Whole and Calls It Education

By Napoleon S. Mawphniang

Socrates once said that the unexamined life is not worth living. But what, I want to ask is the unexamined school? What of the unexamined policy? What of the government that signs documents and issues press releases and then — quietly, efficiently, almost artistically — looks the other way?

Let me start with a number. Just one. Sixteen point zero five percent.

That's the Higher Secondary retention rate in Meghalaya. Sixteen percent. Meaning that out of every hundred children who walk through a school gate in this state with notebooks and a little hope tucked under their arms, only sixteen — sixteen — make it through to Higher Secondary level. The Meghalaya State Education Commission (MSEC) Report 2025 confirmed this. It's not a rumour. It's not opposition propaganda. It's our own government's commissioned data, sitting there like a body nobody wants to identify. (as per The Shillong Times, November 26, 2025, citing the MSEC findings in a detailed analysis on education reform.)

Dostoevsky once wrote, "The degree of civilisation in a society can be judged by entering its prisons." I would add a corollary for our age: the degree of a government's seriousness can be judged by entering its classrooms. Go. Visit one. Not the ones they photograph for brochures. Go to a lower primary school in North Garo Hills, where the secondary dropout rate is a staggering 43.54%. Tell me what civilisation looks like there.

There's a Greek myth — Sisyphus, condemned to roll a boulder up a hill for eternity, only for it to roll back down every time. Our education system is Sisyphean. We enrol children. We celebrate numbers. And then, quietly, we watch them leave — and we start again, celebrating fresh enrolments, pretending the haemorrhage didn't happen. One in four students at the secondary level doesn't complete Class X, according to the same MSEC Report. At the transition from Class X to XI? Only 35.28% of students make it. The boulder doesn't even reach halfway up the hill.

And yet — here's the question I can't shake — where is the urgency? Where is the Chief Minister's emergency press conference? Where is the Education Minister's public apology to the parents of North Garo Hills, whose children are dropping out at rates that would embarrass a post-conflict nation?

Paulo Freire called education either a practice of freedom or a practice of domination. In our state Meghalaya, it has quietly, without announcement, become neither. It has become a practice of negligence. Which, in its own way, is the most insidious domination of all — because it doesn't look like violence. It looks like bureaucratic inertia. It looks like officers juggling three district roles simultaneously because there simply aren't enough people. It looks like a DIET faculty vacancy rate of 47% in Resubelpara. It looks like 95% of elementary schools having no electricity and 97% having no functional headmaster's room. (as per The Shillong Times, November 26, 2025.)

Ask yourself: would you send your child to a school without electricity? Without a library? Without a trained teacher? No. Of course not. And neither would the Education Minister, if he's being honest. But the children of our villages — our children, flesh of this soil — have no alternative.

Now comes the New Education Policy 2020. Bold. Ambitious. Transformative, they said as per policy. A 5+3+3+4 structure. Foundational Literacy and Numeracy missions. Twenty-first-century skills. Mother tongue instruction. All beautifully written. All magnificently framed.

And all, in Meghalaya, performing the role of decoration.

Wittgenstein said that language disguises thought. The NEP 2020 is extraordinarily skilled at this disguise. It speaks of "holistic development" and "multidisciplinary learning" — gorgeous, weightless phrases that cost nothing to write and apparently even less to implement. Hermeneutics teaches us to look past the surface of a text, to ask what the speaker actually means. Apply that lens to any government statement on education in Meghalaya, and the gap between what is said and what is done yawns like an abyss.

Meanwhile, nearly 30% of Meghalaya's entire teaching workforce — 16,428 teachers — holds no professional teaching qualification. (as perThe Shillong Times, November 26, 2025.) The largest concentration is at the Lower Primary level, where children are most vulnerable, most impressionable, most in need of pedagogical skill. And at the DIETs — the institutions tasked with training these very teachers — 30% of faculty positions sit vacant. Between 2019 and 2024, DIETs collectively trained only 18.85% of elementary teachers. Eighteen percent. In five years.

Ambedkar understood something that our present government seems to have forgotten entirely: that education is not charity to us . It is a constitutional obligation. It is the mechanism by which a democracy renews itself. Article 21A of the Constitution of India mandates free and compulsory education for children aged six to fourteen. It does not say "where convenient." It does not say "subject to staff availability." It says: compulsory.

Joost Meerloo, in The Rape of the Mind, described how the systematic erosion of critical thinking — through propaganda, through confusion, through deliberate institutional fatigue — produces populations who no longer question those who govern them. I'm not accusing our government of anything as calculated as that. But I am asking: when a government persistently fails to act on documented, published, peer-reviewed evidence of educational catastrophe — when the MSEC Report sits on shelves while children in North Garo Hills stop going to school — is there not something mildly Meerloovian about the silence that follows? The studied indifference? The press releases about digital transformation while 26.4% of schools have internet access?

Kafka would've recognised this system immediately. The Form Submitted But Never Processed. The Officer In Charge Of Three Districts Who Can Inspect None Properly. The Training That 81% of Teachers Never Received. The Policy Announced With Great Fanfare That Cannot Be Implemented Because The Infrastructure For It Doesn't Exist. This is bureaucratic absurdism dressed in ministerial language, and the children caught inside it have no Gregor Samsa moment of revelation — they simply disappear. Into early labour. Into migration. Into the great statistical silence of "dropout."

Orwell warned us - in Politics and the English Language that political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable. When the Meghalaya government speaks of "alignment with NEP 2020," I reach for Bah G Orwell. When they speak of "transformative reforms" while 84% of teachers go untrained in five years, I reach for Orwell again. The language is immaculate. The reality is grotesque.

So. What are the questions that demand answers?

Why has the government of Meghalaya not declared the education dropout rate a state emergency? Why are DIET faculty positions still vacant despite documented evidence of their critical role? Why was mother tongue instruction described as a "rhetorical aspiration" in the MSEC Report rather than operational reality? Why are untrained teachers being sent to West Bengal for training with, as The Shillong Times noted, "little information available on their performance"?

And the deepest question of all — the one Socrates might have asked, slowly, sitting in the agora, making the powerful uncomfortable — who is responsible? Not as a matter of blame, but as a matter of governance. Who owns this failure?

Education, BR Ambedkar believed, was the sunlight that the oppressed needed most desperately. In our state Meghalaya today, that sunlight is being blocked — not by malice, perhaps, but by something equally dangerous: by indifference wearing the face of governance. By a government that signs policy documents the way someone signs a menu at a restaurant — present for the ritual, absent for the consequences.

Sixteen percent retained. Eighty-four percent lost.

The boulder rolls back down. And Sisyphus — wearing the face of a child from North Garo Hills or Syad Lyngdoh Village — picks it up again.

The question is not whether Meghalaya's children deserve better. The question is when we — the governed, the voters, the parents, the conscience of this state — will refuse to accept an answer that isn't yes.

(Napoleon S. Mawphniang writes as a concerned citizen. The views expressed are entirely his own and represent no political affiliation).

Salt and Blade: The Oath that Echoed through the Hills

By Maitphang Syiem

Imagine a blade, cold and gleaming, with a few grains of salt resting upon its edge. A man leans forward and licks it. In that single gesture, he does not merely perform a ritual; he binds himself to an oath that must outlast convenience, outlive danger, and outshine power. It is from this image that the meaning of salt and blade must be understood.

Salt, though simple in appearance, has always been more than a seasoning. Long before refrigeration, it preserved food, prevented decay, and made survival through harsh seasons possible. Its worth was so immense that in ancient Rome, soldiers were at times associated with allowances linked to salt, and the often-cited connection between the words sal, salarium, and salary reflects the material and symbolic value attached to it. Salt was not only substance; it was endurance itself.

Furthermore, in the Hebrew Bible salt also appears in important rituals, the 'covenant of salt' appears in many books such as Numbers, Chronicles, and in the New Testament in Matthew, Mark, Luke and Colossians. In all these, Salt appears to be a factor of agreement that was enduring, incorruptible and divinely sanctioned. So, the metaphor of permanence is perfectly fitted because of the preservative nature, just as salt keeps food from spoiling, a Salt covenant keeps a promise from rotting.

In the Middle East or rather West Asia, sharing salt during meal time reflects a binding gesture and to eat someone's salt was to swear protection and loyalty. Similarly in Arab cultures even today such a covenant exists: men who have partaken of salt together are honour-bound to defend one another, even if they were once enemies. The universality of this symbolism suggests something deeply human: when we share a substance that sustains life, we share a moral obligation to sustain each other.

However, the curiosity as to what a grain of Salt on a Blade means is still to be looked upon from the Khasi tradition. What can be seen is that it is not a mere ritual, but it's a summons. So, in the Khasi moral universe to lick Salt from a Blade is to bind oneself to a promise that must outlast convenience, outlive danger and outshine power. Deducing the concept, what can be derived is that Salt in its original nature portrays preservation and the Blade of-course power and protection and together they form a covenant of trust, an oath of fidelity that nourishes the body while reminding the soul of its duty. This act of setting the covenant offers us more than a symbol of the past; it opens up an understanding and the lens through which we can grasp the notion why people went to war not because they hated peace, but because the sacred covenant had been shattered and betrayed.

Therefore, to simply put it, the Khasi oath of licking Salt from the Blade takes the ancient grammar and gives it a local accent. As you can see, Salt symbolises not merely a preservative or the ingredient for taste but actually the condiment of trust and the flavour of shared existence. The Blade is not just an instrument of war, but it symbolises the duty to protect oneself, one's family and one's community. It also carries a double meaning which speaks of the capacity to defend and the discipline of knowing when and why to fight and when Salt is placed upon it and licked, it creates an unmistakable message, a life-sustaining bond and an absolute duty to defend.

In the Khasi tradition this covenant doesn't fit into the dictionary of simplicism and was never taken lightly and betrayal was not forgiven easily. Having discussed the integrity of the Salt and the Blade, what can be deduced is that precisely the Anglo-Khasi war of 1829-1833 was not a mere tribal uprising as it is usually understood, but it was more than that. The conflict started with a Bridle path which the colonists wanted to build to connect Kamrup, Nongkhlaw and Pandua in Sylhet, as it appears to the colonists this was a commercial arrangement for passage but for the Khasis this was not—it was a covenant between political equals sealed with the gravity of Salt and Blade.

What can be understood is that the Bridle path was not meant to be a corridor for the colonists; it was meant to be a shared path governed by mutual respect. However, in due course that covenant curdled into domination and suppression and in the simple eyes of the Khasis this was the distortion of the sacred trust which as said earlier was not to be easily forgiven. The breaking of the covenant was not just a diplomatic technicality but it was a moral wound.

If one can recall when U Tirot Sing convened his Dorbar and ordered the Colonists to evacuate Nongkhlaw he was not rejecting friendship; he was insisting that friendship be honoured but eventually that was ignored by the colonists which led to the famous and most talked event the 'Nongkhlaw Massacre', while for the Colonist it was a massacre but for the Khasis it is a reckoning.

Here the most interesting aspect to be discussed is the spatial knowledge of the Khasis. Though they had no firearms, their knowledge of the terrain the courage of conviction, and the moral certainty that they were defending a broken oath meant that calling this merely a 'rebellion' misses the point, it was a defence of honour, territory, and the sacred bond between a ruler and his land.

U Tirot Sing was not alone and his resistance was part of a broader confederacy of the Khasi Chiefdoms that understood the threat posed by the colonists. Many of his contemporaries supported the (Chief) Syiem of Nongkhlaw in his journey of defending the oath, from U Bor Manik, to U Mon Bhut, to Ka Phan Nonglait to U Shyllong Syiem, the then Syiem (Chief) of the erstwhile Nongpoh Syiemship (Hima Khad-ar Lyngdoh) who provided warriors from his dominion to Tirot Sing. The war was the response of a political society whose spatial world was being redrawn without its consent. The Salt and Blade oath bound these allies together, not because they were identical in interest, but because they shared a common understanding: the land was not empty space to be traversed; it was a living territory to be protected.

Having elaborated on this what does this teach the present generation? The Salt and Blade oath is not a museum piece. It is a living question. In our Dorbars, our councils, our development projects, and our inter-community agreements, our commitment to Mei-Ramew, the principle must remain. The generation that remembers U Tirot Sing only as a warrior misses half the story. He was a man who believed that a promise made with salt and steel was stronger than the empire that broke it. He may be wrong about the empire's strength, but he was right about the promise's truth. For a generation that inherits both the pride and the pain, the answer must be written not in blood, but in the quieter, harder work of fidelity: to the land, to the word, and to each other.

(The writer is a Geospatial Expert from the lineage of U Shyllong Syiem of the Erstwhile Nongpoh Syiemship)

Letters to the Editor

Don't Turn Sacred Festivals into Political Battlegrounds

Editor,

The Voice of the People Party's (VPP) protest against inviting Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma to the Behdienkhlam Festival is unfortunate. It is disappointing to see a sacred cultural and religious festival being dragged into political controversy. Behdienkhlam is a centuries-old festival of the Pnar community. It is a festival of faith, culture, and unity. The responsibility of organising the festival, including deciding whom to invite, belongs entirely to its organisers. No political party should interfere in these decisions.

The border dispute between Meghalaya and Assam is an important issue and should be resolved as early as possible. But connecting that issue with a religious festival is not the right approach. There are proper platforms where political leaders can raise and discuss such matters. A sacred festival should not be used to send political messages.

It is also wrong to assume that inviting someone to a festival means supporting that person's politics or government. In our culture, inviting guests is a tradition of respect and hospitality. It should not be misunderstood or turned into a political issue. If political parties start deciding who can or cannot attend our traditional festivals, it will weaken the freedom and dignity of our cultural institutions. Our festivals should remain above party politics and continue to bring people together.

The people of Meghalaya expect political leaders to protect and respect our rich traditions, not create unnecessary controversy around them. There is a time and place to discuss political issues, but Behdienkhlam is not one of them.

The VPP should think carefully before turning sacred festivals into political battlegrounds. Such actions do not strengthen our traditions; they only create division and take attention away from the true purpose of the festival.

Yours etc.,
Mantre H Dkhar,
Via email

Not in the name of Xavier

Editor

May I refer to the letters by D. Bhattacharjee and NK Nehar in the Shillong Times of July 10, 2026 in which they have registered their objections to the proposal to establish a university in the name of Francis Xavier. Any informed person has to concur with their views.

Xavier was responsible for initiating the Goa Inquisition which lasted from 1560-1812, with a brief hiatus from 1774-78. Historians agree that the Goa Inquisition was characterized by exceptional brutality, even more than the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions. Some have characterised the torture and slaughter of Hindus, Muslims, Protestant Christians, and Jews as a holocaust. Buddhists and tribals were also not spared.

The Inquisitors also burned books written in Sanskrit, Dutch, English, or Konkani, as they were suspected of containing teachings that deviated from Catholic doctrine or promoted Protestant, Hindu or Muslim doctrine. While conversion to Catholicism was the main objective, it was also a strategy to remove competition in trade.

In 1545, Francis Xavier wrote to King John III of Portugal requesting a Goan Inquisition. The original letter still exists, and contains this passage, "The second necessity which obtains in India, if those who live there are to be good Christians, is that your highness should institute the holy Inquisition; for there are many who live according to the law of Moses. or the law of Muhammad without any fear of God or shame before men."

Hundreds of Hindu temples were destroyed. Hindu marriages were not permitted and possession of an idol was described as a crime. "The Destruction of the Inquisition in Goa" is a poem by early American poet Lydia Sigourney, published in her 1815 collection Moral Pieces in Prose and Verse. The poem is a noteworthy historical record of how the atrocities committed during the Portuguese colonial era in Goa resonated globally, reaching early 19th-century American literary circles.

The purpose of this letter is not to denigrate any religion, but to draw attention to historical facts. Given the history of communal clashes in India, the decision to memorialise Francis Xavier is an affront to inter-religious harmony. Surely Meghalaya does not need this flashpoint for trouble. The Government must rescind this decision.

Many authentic references from Western and Indian scholars in respected academic sources can be cited. These references can be supplied on request.

Yours, etc.,
Alister Mawrie,
Via email

Pioneering Concept of Land Banks

Editor,

The recent tabling of the Land Bill in the KHADC is significant and simultaneously offers a holistic approach towards streamlining administrative procedures involving land rights and land ownership. Most interesting was the discussion to initiate land banking to address homeless families within a village commune, alongside establishing a land ceiling for those purchasing land within the Council's jurisdiction. For readers, the concept of the land bank was envisaged by Phrang Roy, former IFAD Vice President, Daniel Ingty former Director of Agriculture and Late Professor A.K.Nongkynrih from NEHU, during the maiden intervention under the erstwhile MRDS-IFAD LIPH project where we had worked together.

The whole idea of the land bank was to educate and sensitize the local village communities on land conservation by addressing landless farming households as well as villagers who lacked the capital to purchase land. The Meghalaya Institute of Governance also addressed this subject, when I was working as a resource expert to guide and develop this model in select areas of Khasi and Jaintia Hills with support from Aiban Swer, the then Director of MIG along with inputs from Patricia Mukhim.

The current move by the VPP led-executive committee is a step in the right direction provided that the State Government is taken into confidence as a partner, not as an adversary that is against the welfare and right to land ownership within the jurisdiction of the Dorbar Hima, Dorbar Raid and Dorbar Shnong. It is sad that even after 50 plus years of statehood we have no clear state policy to address the growing landlessness faced by our people - in particular - the urban poor and the rural poor too. I hope this letter hits the ears and minds of the state to draw up a policy in collaboration with all stakeholders.

Yours etc.,
Dominic S. Wankhar,
Via email

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

"Happiness is the natural flower of duty."

— **Phillips Brooks**

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Arbitrary Actions of Dorbar Shnong

A growing debate in Meghalaya concerns whether the institution of the Dorbar Shnong has acquired powers unmatched by corresponding legal accountability. While the Dorbar Shnong are a product of tradition and have performed important community functions, the debate today is whether they should exercise public authority without clear constitutional and legal safeguards. One thing that stands out is the arbitrary nature of the function of Dorbar Shnongs. Each Shnong has its own Constitution but as an offshoot of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution it should follow uniform sets of governance rules so that no Dorbar oversteps its limits. It is high time the Dorbar Shnongs are guided by a uniform legal framework, as tradition may have served society well when Meghalaya was largely agrarian. Today the rapid changes overtaking society—a large section of which has turned capitalistic—reduce the traditional institution to a mere "no objection certificate" issuing body.

The very fact that buildings are constructed right on the rivers across Shillong without leaving the mandatory six feet distance from any river is itself a commentary on the failure of the Dorbar Shnong to exercise its powers ethically. A river is a source of life and Khasis revere the rivers and forests and weave all manner of folklore around them. No Dorbar Shnong with a conscience should have allowed any construction to come up on a river because that means releasing raw sewage and grey water from kitchens and toilets straight into the river. Over and above that the Dorbar Shnong are supposed to strictly implement the law that vehicles should not be washed on the river because that causes pollution. But in areas like Nongmynsong the Dorbar Shnong allows that, possibly because the vehicle owners pay them money. At the end of the day its all about money. Even in land transactions every Dorbar Shnong sets arbitrary amounts to be paid by the seller and buyer for sale and purchase of land. Neither the District Councils nor the State Government have set the standard amount to be paid for land sale and purchase transactions.

The Dorbar Shnong derive their powers from customary law, local traditions, and from Autonomous District Council legislations governing headmen and traditional institutions. As a result, powers and procedures differ from one village to another. Recently the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council legislation has attempted to define some duties, such as maintaining records, keeping accounts, convening meetings, and recording decisions, but these reforms are not equivalent to a comprehensive constitutional framework. Another problem is that many Dorbar Shnongs exercise functions that affect fundamental rights of citizens. They issue residential certificates, regulate tenancy, register residents, control access to community resources, and sometimes influence who may conduct business or reside within a locality. While some of these functions help maintain order, decisions can directly affect a person's Constitutional rights. The Constitution requires that such powers be exercised fairly and without discrimination.It is time for Autonomous District Councils to enact uniform laws by laying down minimum standards for all Dorbar Shnongs. Mandatory written constitutions specifying powers, procedures, tenure, elections or selection methods, and financial accountability are imperative. Dorbar Shnong should comply with Articles 14, 15 and 21 of the Constitution, ensuring equality, non-discrimination and due process. Above all there should be equal participation of women in village governance.

Who Defines the Jaiñtia? History or Colonial Records?

Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah

By reducing the history of the Jaiñtia people almost entirely to British colonial records, Bhogtoram Mawroh's article, "Who Are the Jaintia? Colonial Records and the Question of Khasi Identity" (The Shillong Times, 2 April), makes a fundamental historical error. Colonial records are valuable sources, but they are not the sole authority on indigenous identity. They reflect the administrative priorities, linguistic limitations, and political assumptions of British officials rather than the self-understanding of the communities they described.

The concern behind this response is not merely academic disagreement but a growing tendency among some writers to question Jaiñtia identity whenever the community asserts its constitutional, cultural, or historical distinctiveness. Instead of engaging with legitimate concerns regarding recognition of that identity, some continue to argue that "Jaiñtia" is merely a geographical term and that the community is simply a branch of the Khasi. This claim is neither new nor persuasive.

The principal weakness in Mawroh's argument is the assumption that because British officials often described the inhabitants of the Jaintia Hills as "Khasi," the question of ethnic identity is settled. It is not. Across British India, administrators routinely grouped diverse indigenous communities under broad labels for ease of governance. Such classifications were administrative conveniences, not ethnographic truths, and they cannot override the historical identities of the communities concerned.

Even within Mawroh's own argument, he acknowledges that British records also placed Tiwas, Karbis, and other groups within the Jaintia Hills. By his logic, should these communities also lose their distinct identities? Clearly not. Administrative inclusion within a territory has never erased ethnic or cultural distinction.

The Jaiñtia identity predates colonial administration. A district does not create a people; rather, a people give their name to a territory. The modern districts of East and West Jaintia Hills, as well as the earlier colonial Jaintia Hills District, were created long after the community already existed. The British did not invent the Jaiñtia people; they merely adopted an existing ethnonym for administrative purposes. Historical and linguistic evidence points to much older origins. Scholars have traced the Jaiñtia people to Austro-Asiatic or Mon-Khmer-speaking populations who settled in Northeast India centuries before British rule. Variants such as T'sin-taing, T'sin-tein, Zyntein, and Synteng illustrate the gradual evolution of the ethnonym through normal linguistic change. Such transformations indicate continuity rather than invention.

Professor B. Pakem notes that the origins of the Jaiñtia people have long attracted scholarly attention. He discusses theories of eastern migration among Austro-Asiatic-speaking groups, while some Burmese traditions suggest movements from the west. He also refers to broader anthropological discussions linking Austro-Asiatic-speaking populations to ancient Proto-Australoid branches.

According to traditions discussed by Pakem, the ancestors of the Hynniewtrep undertook long migratory movements through regions including Palestine, Egypt, Ethiopia, ancient Mesopotamia, northern India, and southern China before dispersing into Southeast Asia. One branch is believed to have settled among the Mons in Burma, whose cultural affinities with the Jaiñtias have often been observed. From there they are said to have crossed the Kupli River into present-day Jaintia Hills around the third century BCE. Pakem further records traditions of later migration under leaders such as U Shyllong, leading to settlement in areas like Sohphohlynrum.

Not every aspect of these migration narratives is universally accepted. Their importance lies in demonstrating that scholars have consistently situated the origins of the Jaiñtia people in deep antiquity rather than in colonial administrative records.

Linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterjee proposed that "Synteng" may originally have been pronounced as Zainteiñ or Zanten before evolving through Sanskritisation into forms such as Jayanta or Jayanti. This suggests that "Jaintia" or "Jayantia" developed through linguistic adaptation rather than originating as a Sanskrit place name. In this interpretation, the people came first, and political or territorial names followed.

Mawroh reverses this sequence by suggesting that the ethnonym derives primarily from Jaintiapur or the deity Jayanteshwari. This remains speculative and finds little support in linguistic evidence, which more commonly shows places deriving their names from peoples rather than peoples from places.

There is also a tendency in his article to repeatedly question the term "Jaiñtia" itself, as though sustained etymological doubt could weaken an established historical identity. However, historical identity is not undone by repetition of scepticism. Sound inquiry must evaluate evidence broadly rather than focus narrowly on one disputed interpretation.

It would also be useful if Mawroh explained the origin and historical development of the word "Khasi" itself. If the legitimacy of an ethnic identity is to be tested through the history of its name, then the same scholarly standard should apply consistently. If the writer insists on dissecting the origin of "Jaiñtia," he should also be prepared to explain the equally debated origin of "Khasi" using the same scholarly standard. The origin of "Khasi" has likewise been debated, with no universally accepted explanation. A balanced discussion should therefore examine the histories of both names with equal rigour instead of treating one as settled and the other as doubtful. Such an approach would give readers a fairer understanding of the complex history of Meghalaya's indigenous tribes.

Evidence for the antiquity of the Jaiñtia people extends beyond colonial archives. Chinese chronicles such as the Shung-Shu (5th century CE) have been linked by some scholars to political formations in the Kapili region associated with early Jaintia polities. Whether or not every interpretation is accepted, such references indicate organised political structures in the region long before British classification.

Archaeology reinforces this continuity. Stone boundary pillars marking the extent of the former Jaintia Kingdom, including those preserved near Jamunagaon in present-day Assam, testify to established territorial authority. Such monuments reflect organised governance, not colonial invention. Political boundaries arise because communities exercise authority over land, not because colonial districts create identities.

Oral traditions likewise preserve histories of migration, settlement, lineage, and kingship across generations. Modern historiography recognises oral tradition as a legitimate historical source when critically examined alongside archaeology, linguistics, and written evidence. Indigenous history cannot be dismissed simply because it was not first recorded by colonial administrators.

A particularly revealing aspect of Mawroh's argument is his reliance on British references to U Kiang Nangbah as a "Khasi" rebel. This reflects colonial categorisation rather than indigenous self-identification. British officials frequently applied broad ethnic labels for administrative convenience without recognising internal distinctions among indigenous communities. Equally revealing is their description of U Kiang Nangbah as a "rebel"- a term that served the colonial state, whereas history recognises him as a freedom fighter who resisted foreign rule. Mawroh's acceptance of this colonial terminology raises an important question: why privilege the language and classifications of the colonial administration instead of examining the political intent and bias behind them?

Ironically, the uprising led by U Kiang Nangbah (1860–62) was itself a response to British interference in the religious and cultural life of the Jaintia Hills. It was a struggle to defend indigenous institutions, customary practices, and political autonomy. To privilege colonial terminology while overlooking the indigenous context of that resistance is to elevate administrative classification above historical reality. It is equally inaccurate to argue that linguistic affinity alone determines identity. Even if Khasi and Jaiñtia share linguistic roots, language families do not define singular ethnic identities. Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes share North Germanic origins yet remain distinct peoples. Spaniards and Italians belong to the Romance language family but retain separate identities. Assamese and Bengalis are both Indo-Aryan speakers while remaining distinct communities. Linguistic relationship does not erase cultural, political, or historical distinction.

Ethnic identity is shaped by much more than language. It encompasses political history, customary law, social institutions, religion, collective historical experience, and above all, self-identification. Any attempt to reduce Jaiñtia identity solely to linguistic classification ignores these broader dimensions.

Attempts to subsume Jaiñtia identity are not new. In the 1950s, proposals to discontinue the Jaintia Programme on All India Radio Shillong were firmly opposed by Sein Jaintia Shillong, recognising its importance for cultural representation. The programme survived because of community resistance. Similar concerns have been expressed over attempts to subsume the indigenous faith Niamtre under a broader "Niam Khasi" framework. While unity among indigenous peoples is desirable, it cannot come at the cost of erasing distinct traditions. Niamtre possesses its own rituals, priesthood, cosmology, and historical development within Jaiñtia society.

These examples reveal a recurring pattern. Whenever the Jaiñtia community asserts its distinct identity, that identity is sometimes questioned or minimised. Yet history repeatedly demonstrates that communities preserve their identity not by dissolving it but by defending it. Indigenous peoples across the world continue reclaiming names and histories once flattened by colonial classifications.

None of this denies the close relationship between Khasi and Jaiñtia peoples. They share ancient linguistic connections, geographical proximity, and centuries of interaction. Shared ancestry, however, does not require uniform identity. Mutual respect is strengthened by recognising difference rather than erasing it.

The central question is not whether colonial records referred to Jaiñtia people as "Khasi." The real question is whether such records should override archaeology, linguistics, oral traditions, political history, and the community's own understanding of its identity. Clearly, they should not. Colonial records are one source among many; they are not the final authority.

Historical reconstruction must rest upon multiple forms of evidence rather than selective reliance on administrative documents. To privilege colonial classification over indigenous history is to reproduce precisely the limitations of colonial knowledge that modern scholarship has long sought to overcome.

The Jaiñtia people possess documented histories of migration and political development, a distinct cultural heritage, a recognised language, unique religious traditions, and a continuous historical record predating British rule. Their identity is neither a colonial construction nor a mere geographical label. The land bears the name because the people bore it first.

To reduce Jaiñtia identity to an administrative category is not only historically inaccurate; it diminishes a living heritage. A people with such deep historical roots cannot be understood through colonial labels alone but only through a comprehensive reading of archaeology, linguistics, oral traditions, political history, and lived cultural reality.

The Price of Neglect

By Darisuk Syiemlieh

There is a quiet tragedy unfolding in Meghalaya, one so ordinary that it rarely makes headlines. It is not marked by natural disasters or sudden economic collapses. Instead, it reveals itself in empty classrooms after graduation, in certificates carefully preserved inside ageing folders, in talented young minds waiting endlessly for opportunities that never arrive. It is the tragedy of a society that repeatedly overlooks its finest minds while celebrating those who have merely mastered the art of influence, connections and self-promotion. It is a tragedy made even more painful because it is largely preventable.

Meghalaya possesses hidden treasures that seldom receive the recognition they deserve. They are not always the loudest voices in public gatherings, nor the most influential figures in political circles. They are the diligent students who studied despite hardship, the young men and women who sacrificed comfort in pursuit of knowledge, and the graduates who believed that education would become the bridge between aspiration and dignity. They are individuals who possess intelligence without arrogance, integrity without publicity, and compassion without expectation of reward. Ironically, these are often the very people who remain invisible when opportunities are distributed.

From childhood, society teaches a powerful lesson: education is the pathway to a better life. Parents encourage their children to study hard. Teachers remind students that discipline and dedication will eventually be rewarded. Society praises merit as the foundation upon which progress is built. Yet many young people eventually discover a painful reality: education alone does not guarantee opportunity. Degrees do not always lead to employment. Ability does not always defeat influence. Hard work does not always overcome unfair advantages. Merit sometimes finds itself competing against connections, favouritism and systems that do not always recognise genuine potential.

The consequences of this contradiction extend far beyond unemployment statistics. Behind every unemployed graduate is a human story. There are parents who sacrificed their comfort, families who invested their hopes, and young people who spent years believing that their efforts would eventually bear fruit. When such individuals remain without meaningful work despite possessing knowledge and ability, the damage is not merely economic. It affects confidence, dignity and faith in the very society that encouraged them to dream.

Unemployment eventually turns people toward crime. The overwhelming majority of unemployed youth continue to live honestly, support their families and struggle with dignity. Hardship does not remove personal responsibility, and poverty does not justify wrongdoing. However, it would also be naive to ignore the conditions that make some vulnerable individuals susceptible to destructive influences. Reports suggest many of Meghalaya's talented youths have now engaged in sex work, drug trafficking, thievery, extortion etc.

A young person who spends years searching for honest opportunities but repeatedly encounters rejection, humiliation and hopelessness becomes easy prey to those who offer quick money, power or recognition. Criminal networks and exploitative groups in Meghalaya and beyond often target individuals who feel abandoned by society. They provide a sense of belonging and purpose to people who have lost faith in legitimate pathways. The tragedy is not only the crime that may follow; it is the loss of the potential that existed before frustration took control. A brilliant mind that could have become a teacher, scientist, entrepreneur, administrator or community leader may instead become involved in activities that harm both the individual, society and the state. History has shown that neglected populations often become vulnerable to anger, resentment and manipulation. When young people begin to believe that honesty brings no reward while dishonesty brings success and wealth, the moral foundation of society weakens. A system that repeatedly ignores capable citizens unintentionally sends a dangerous message: that patience, integrity and hard work have little value. At this point, an uncomfortable question demands to be asked: Who failed our brightest minds? It is not a question directed at one person, one government or one institution alone. It is a question that challenges society as a whole. Every unemployed youth with genuine ability, every talented young person forced to abandon a dream, and every capable citizen compelled to leave home in search of dignity represents more than an individual disappointment. They are reminders of opportunities lost and promises left unfulfilled.

Governments carry significant responsibility in this matter. A society cannot progress when employment systems lack transparency, when recruitment processes lose public confidence, or when development remains concentrated in only a few areas. Creating opportunities is not merely an economic responsibility; it is a social obligation. A state that educates its youth but fails to provide avenues for their contribution creates frustration instead of progress.

Educational institutions must also reflect upon their role. Universities cannot simply produce graduates and consider their responsibility complete. Education must prepare young people not only for examinations but for real participation in society. Critical thinking, practical skills, innovation and adaptability are essential. However, education reform alone cannot solve the problem if the economy cannot absorb the very people it has trained.

Communities also share responsibility. Too often, society celebrates people only after they achieve status, wealth or authority. The struggling scholar, the dedicated teacher, the honest worker and the talented young person searching for a chance often receive little recognition. We admire success after it appears but fail to nurture potential before it blooms.

Migration has become one of the clearest signs of this failure. Across many regions, talented young people from Meghalaya leave because they cannot find opportunities within it. Families are separated, local communities lose their brightest minds, and regions already struggling with development experience further decline. Every talented person forced to leave represents not only a personal journey but also a collective loss.

Perhaps the greatest injustice is the silent resignation that eventually settles upon many capable individuals. They reduce their dreams to match available opportunities. They accept work far below their abilities simply to survive. Society praises their ability to endure while ignoring the circumstances that made endurance necessary. There is a deep contradiction in encouraging young people to dream while providing them so little space to realise those dreams.

The measure of a civilisation is not only the number of institutions it builds or the speeches it delivers about youth empowerment. It is measured by how faithfully it identifies, encourages and utilises the abilities of its people. Intelligence left unemployed benefits no one. Creativity left unused helps no one. Integrity left unrewarded discourages those who still believe in honest effort.

The solution does not lie in blaming one group or surrendering to pessimism. Responsibility is shared, and so must be the commitment to change. Governments must build transparent and merit-based systems. Educational institutions must prepare students for meaningful participation in society. Communities must learn to value character and ability over influence and popularity. Employers must recognise competence over connections. Society must understand that its greatest wealth is not in its resources, buildings or institutions but in the minds, talents and aspirations of its people. To neglect those gifts is both an economic mistake and a moral failure. A society that continually sidelines its brightest minds while rewarding influence should not be surprised at the frustration of those who feel forgotten. The tragedy is not only that some individuals may lose their way but that society may lose extraordinary talent before it ever has the opportunity to serve humanity.

History has repeatedly shown that societies which ignore their finest minds eventually pay a price far greater than they ever imagined. Before that price becomes irreversible, every government, every institution, every community and every citizen should have the courage to confront one simple but deeply unsettling question: Who failed our brightest minds?

(The author is a double major in Mass Communication and Social Work, currently pursuing her studies in Pune, India)

Letters to the Editor

Stop Favouritism in Textbooks Selection

Editor,

I write to draw public attention to worrying practices in the approval and distribution of MBOSE school textbooks that are affecting the quality and fairness of education in our state. Over the past two years, MBOSE approvals appear to favour books from only one or two publishers, leaving many local publishers without any opportunity to contribute to state education. Several of these publishers operate under multiple firm names while being controlled by the same proprietor or family, creating an unhealthy monopoly. This practice should be stopped in the larger interest of other local publishers.

It has also come to light that the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) has been placing certain titles for free distribution that are not part of the MBOSE-prescribed syllabus. Supplying non-syllabus books through government schemes unfairly benefits selected publishers and confuses teachers and students about the official curriculum.

These practices, if allowed to continue, risk lowering the standard of education in Meghalaya and could negatively affect our state's standing in national performance measures (PGI). Transparency, fairness, and accountability in textbook approval and procurement are essential to protect students' interests and support honest local publishers who genuinely want to contribute to the state's academic excellence. Favouritism towards a particular publisher will only discourage other local publishers and writers. It is also important that, when selecting books from publishers, their antecedents and backgrounds should be thoroughly vetted. Some publishers have earned a disrepute for promoting piracy and selling duplicate books in the past.

Yours etc.;
Name withheld on request
Via email

The Dirtiest Lane in Jowai Town

Editor,

The lane which surrounds Biar Mynthong also called Tympang playground, is now the dirtiest lane in Jowai Town. In fact, I do not want to pen down my writing in the newspaper but I am forced to do so as most of us Mynthong people have to pass through this lane come what may. Perhaps people from other localities of the town have not passed through this lane. If such people pass through this lane they will be surprised to see that such a lane exists. In fact, the whole of Jowai Town is full of garbage randomly dumped in areas like Iawshyiap, Iaw Warim, Iaw thymme.

Compared to the above, the lane fenced by Tympang Club is the dirtiest of all. When passing through this lane one has to cover his or her nose and mouth because of the foul odour. One day, I met the Rangbah Shnong of Tympang Club. When asked about the dirty condition of this lane, he told me that the Club would remove the fence. Again, on July 6 while coming from Punjab National Bank I asked him the same question and he gave me the same reply. Let's see when action will be taken. As the saying goes, "Life and death is in the power of the tongue."

Also, during lunch break in the nearby schools there are boys who enjoy their smoke. Some take advantage of this concerned lane. There are young men who also inject drugs as told by some reliable person.

Again, in Iaw Shyiap, there are toilets provided yet most settlers choose this place to urinate or pass excreta; even the dogs follow suit. Above all this is a very scary place at night. In this place, we will find all kinds of garbage thrown by people from every other locality. If only the District Administration puts up CCTV cameras then those who throw garbage and use the place as an open toilet can be punished by Tympang Club as the authority lies with the Club. Over the years we have witnessed many events such as Fetes, Church Meetings, Trade Fairs etc., No doubt Tympang Club earns a lot of money from these festivities. But what does the Club do with the money earned? If the Tympang Club could employ two chowkidars there or install street lights for the safety of the passers-by it would be of great help.

Till date, we do not have a proper place to dump our garbage ever since the one at Mynkjai has been disallowed as a garbage dump. When other villages are approached for a dumping ground they all disagree with one voice. It pains me to see this sordid development in our beloved Jowai Town. When I contacted the CEO of Jowai Municipality and asked him whether it is the duty of the Municipality to clean the garbage strewn everywhere, the Chairman told me that once or twice when a lot of garbage has been dumped at a place, it is collected in bulk. Also, when citizens of Jowai asked the CEO, they got the impression that Tympang Club was solely responsible for cleaning this area. Are the authorities listening or will this complaint reach deaf ears yet again? I had voiced this issue twice already, so those in charge of garbage collection and disposal, kindly please respond.

Yours etc.,
Omarga Laloo,
Mynthong

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"Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication."
— Jeff Rich

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Voiceless left

THE Left, which was once perceived as the voice of the poor, is a tame shadow of its former self. From a grand positioning as the principal Opposition to the ruling Congress party in Parliament in the years after Independence, Communists saw their size reducing to just a few there in recent years. Yet, it boasted of holding power in three states – West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala – for several years. With Tripura and Bengal going into the hands of more resourceful political entities, the Communists' last port of call, tiny Kerala in the south, also ousted them from power in the recent assembly polls. In state after state, the influence of the reds is dwindling while regional satraps, the BJP and the Congress proved to be smarter. A revival of the reds' fortunes in India is, perhaps, next to impossible also for the reason that the space for pro-poor politics has been usurped by different regional entities, some of them with pronounced casteist and communal tilts. Corruption in the ranks of the Communists in states where it held power, as in Kerala, also raised questions about the integrity of the Left leadership.

A close analysis of the Left's fall from grace would show that this movement failed to groom leaders of stature. Politics today gets oriented more with personalities in the forefront and less with ideology also because people have by now understood that ideology is just a number. Communists who came to power were no different from the others, and toed the same governance lines, seeking to "impress all", including the bourgeoisie, so as to retain power. Problem is also that with every defeat, the Communists – split into two since the 1960s—failed to address the causes and reorient their approaches. Ditto this time, with the central committee of the CPIM skirting the real issues that hurt the party at the hustings in states like Kerala and West Bengal, and beating around the bush. So also with the Politburo, where rootless leaders confabulate and come up with whimsical justifications for the flaws that drained the party's strengths. Even the Communists' trade union movement, which held significant might in the past, is now yielding ground to other entities due to a lack of a strong, committed leadership.

Communists around the world are on the defensive. A nation like China refashioned its 'ism' by promoting the market economy, a hallmark of capitalism, and emerged as a superpower. Russia, under Vladimir Putin, followed its own path different from the days of the USSR that ended up in disintegration. North Korea and Cuba failed to impress the world. Fidel Castro once said Communism as a political ideology is a failure while Marxism as an economic theory is great. Inside India, a set of 'educated elites' at the helm of the two parties avoided confronting the realities that kept the poor as poor. Their attempts to instead woo the middle class failed as both the Congress and the BJP occupied that space with more energy. Attempts by Communists to raise the slogan of secularism did not help them politically as the Congress held a better reputation for this.

At the Crossroads: Envisioning the Future of Our State and Society

By Dr Donkupar Syiem

We, as a State, a society, and a community, stand at a defining crossroads in our journey of human development. Never before have we faced such profound and simultaneous pressures from both outside and within. As a small indigenous society, we are increasingly confronted by powerful external forces that are reshaping the social, economic, and cultural landscape in which we live. At the same time, internal transformations are challenging long-held traditions, institutions, and ways of thinking, giving rise to new aspirations and new perspectives, particularly among our younger generation.

These changes are driven by an evolving global order that sees the world as an interconnected community, where ideas, information, technology, capital, and commerce transcend political and geographical boundaries. To appreciate the magnitude of the changes before us, it is useful to reflect on how far humanity has travelled.

The First Industrial Revolution, beginning around 1760, marked humanity's transition from traditional tools of stone and wood to the widespread use of metals and mechanised production. The Second Industrial Revolution, around 1870, harnessed steam power, transforming manufacturing, transportation, and trade on an unprecedented scale. The Third Industrial Revolution, beginning in the late twentieth century, ushered in the age of electricity, electronics, computers, and the internet, fundamentally changing communication and productivity.

Today, however, we are experiencing something far more profound than an extension of the digital age. We have entered what Klaus Schwab, Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum, described in 2016 as the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR)—a transformation characterised by the convergence of the physical, digital, and biological worlds. Unlike previous industrial revolutions, which were driven by a single breakthrough technology, the Fourth Industrial Revolution is defined by the simultaneous advancement and convergence of multiple disruptive technologies.

Artificial Intelligence (AI), machine learning, robotics, the Internet of Things (IoT), cloud computing, blockchain, quantum computing, big data analytics, edge computing, augmented and virtual reality, autonomous systems, drones, 3D printing, biotechnology, synthetic biology, and advanced genetic engineering are rapidly transforming every aspect of human life. The award of the 2020 Nobel Prize in Chemistry to Emmanuelle Charpentier and Jennifer Doudna for developing the CRISPR-Cas9 gene-editing technology is just one example of how scientific breakthroughs are redefining the boundaries of medicine and biology. This technology is one of the most significant breakthroughs in modern biology. It has the potential to prevent, treat, and possibly cure many genetic diseases, improve cancer therapies, speed up drug discovery, and enable personalized medicine. At the same time, its use requires careful regulation to ensure that the technology is safe, ethical, and accessible

These technologies are no longer confined to research laboratories or large corporations. They are reshaping healthcare, agriculture, education, finance, manufacturing, governance, entertainment, and public administration. More importantly, they are changing the nature of work itself, creating entirely new industries while rendering many traditional occupations obsolete.

We are simultaneously witnessing the emergence of the Web3 economy—an ecosystem built on decentralisation, digital ownership and assets, blockchain technologies, tokenisation's and decentralised finance. Cryptocurrencies alone have grown into a global market worth trillions of dollars in recent years. Alongside this is the rapid rise of the Creator Economy, estimated to exceed US$100 billion globally, where millions of independent content creators, educators, software developers, designers, artists, filmmakers, bloggers, influencers, and entrepreneurs earn livelihoods by creating digital products and services for global audiences. It is estimated that nearly one billion people worldwide may eventually identify themselves as creators in this expanding digital ecosystem.

For larger nations with vast resources, adapting to this transformation is already a formidable challenge. For a small State with a population of barely three million, the challenge is even greater. Throughout history, our community has demonstrated remarkable resilience, preserving its identity despite centuries of external influences. Today, however, we face a different kind of disruption. Through smartphones, social media, digital commerce, and intelligent technologies, global influences now penetrate directly into our homes, schools, workplaces, and personal lives. Traditional barriers that once protected our cultural and social fabric have become increasingly porous. This is not simply a technological transition; it is a civilisational shift. It raises fundamental questions about who we are, what we value, and how we wish to shape our future. How do we embrace innovation without losing our identity? How do we prepare our youth for careers that may not yet exist while ensuring they remain rooted in our cultural heritage? How do we build a modern economy that is globally competitive while remaining socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable?

These questions are particularly significant because more than seventy-five percent of our population is below the age of thirty-five. This demographic profile represents our greatest opportunity. A young population, if equipped with quality education, relevant skills, good health, and meaningful employment, can become the engine of innovation, entrepreneurship, and economic growth. If neglected, however, the same demographic advantage can become a source of unemployment, outward migration, social unrest, and widening inequality.

At present, our State continues to grapple with several structural challenges, foremost among them being education and healthcare (as seen by numerous articles in The Shillong Times). These are not merely sectors of public service; they are the foundation of human development. Without a healthy and educated population, sustainable economic progress will remain elusive.

Our education system must therefore move beyond rote learning and examination-driven outcomes. It must prepare students not simply to seek jobs but to create them. Critical thinking, creativity, scientific inquiry, digital literacy, entrepreneurship, computational skills, innovation, and lifelong learning must become central to our educational philosophy. Equally important is the need to nurture ethics, civic responsibility, environmental consciousness, and cultural identity so that technological advancement strengthens rather than erodes our social fabric.

Healthcare must also evolve from a predominantly curative model to one that prioritises prevention, primary care, nutrition, mental health, precision medicine, and universal access. Digital health technologies, telemedicine, artificial intelligence, and data-driven public health systems can significantly improve healthcare delivery, particularly in rural and remote areas. Economic transformation is equally urgent. Our dependence on government employment is neither sustainable nor sufficient for future generations. We must foster entrepreneurship, innovation, research, and private enterprise while creating an enabling ecosystem for start-ups, digital businesses, creative industries, tourism, sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, sports, and knowledge-based industries. Our young people should not merely participate in the global digital economy—they should become innovators and leaders within it.

Technology must therefore be viewed not as a threat but as an enabler of inclusive development. Artificial intelligence, digital governance, smart infrastructure, and data analytics can improve public service delivery, strengthen transparency, enhance disaster preparedness, and generate new economic opportunities. Yet technology alone cannot guarantee progress. It must always be guided by human values, social inclusion, and cultural continuity.

Environmental sustainability must remain at the heart of our development strategy. Our forests, rivers, biodiversity, and indigenous ecological knowledge are invaluable assets. Climate change, environmental degradation, and rapid urbanisation require development policies that balance economic growth with responsible stewardship of our natural resources.

The time has therefore come to move beyond incremental reforms and short-term political thinking. What we need is a bold, long-term Vision 2075—or even Vision 2100—that charts the course for the next fifty to one hundred years. Such a vision must transcend electoral cycles and become a shared social compact embraced by government, educational institutions, traditional institutions, civil society, the private sector, and above all, our youth.

This vision should establish measurable goals for education, healthcare, technological innovation, economic transformation, environmental sustainability, institutional excellence, and cultural preservation. It should be evidence-based, globally informed, and locally grounded. Long-term planning must replace reactive governance, while collaboration and innovation must replace fragmented policy-making.

History presents every generation with defining moments. This is ours. The decisions we make today will determine not only the economy we build but also the society we become. If we invest in our people, embrace technological change responsibly, strengthen our institutions, and preserve the values that define us, we can transform today's challenges into tomorrow's opportunities.

The question before us is therefore not whether change will come—it already has. The real question is whether we will merely react to change or whether we will have the vision, courage, and collective resolve to shape the future on our own terms. The answer to that question will determine the destiny of our State and our people for generations to come.

(The author is a Retired Professor, Dept of Biochemistry and former Director, Design Innovation Centre , NEHU)

Motorcycle/Scooty Theft in Meghalaya

It's Time to Stay One Step Ahead of Criminals

By Augusten Blah

The report in The Shillong Times some days ago that nine two-wheelers were stolen across Meghalaya within just six days should concern every citizen. It is not merely another crime statistic, it is a reminder that for many families, a motorcycle/scooty is their primary means of livelihood, transportation, and daily survival. Losing one is not simply an inconvenience; it is an economic setback that affects an entire household.

The Meghalaya Police deserve appreciation for promptly issuing advisories urging citizens to remain vigilant, use anti-theft devices, and park responsibly. These are necessary precautions. However, the growing frequency of motorcycle/scooty theft demands a broader conversation. We cannot expect citizens alone to shoulder the responsibility of preventing crime. Crime prevention must evolve with changing times.

The first question we should ask is whether these thefts are isolated incidents or the work of an organised network. When multiple motorcycle/scooty disappear within a short span across different locations, the possibility of a coordinated gang cannot be ignored. Such networks often steal these two-wheelers to dismantle them for spare parts, alter engine and chassis numbers, or transport them across district and state borders. Investigations, therefore, should not stop at recovering stolen motorcycle/scooty. Equal attention must be given to identifying the criminal syndicates, illegal workshops, and black markets that enable stolen vehicles to be dismantled and sold.

Crime prevention today requires a smarter, technology-driven, intelligence-led, and community-supported approach.

One of the first steps should be the creation of a State Vehicle Theft Prevention Task Force, comprising the Meghalaya Police, Transport Department, district administrations, insurance companies, and representatives of Dorbar Shnongs. Rather than reacting after each theft, this specialised task force could analyse crime patterns, identify vulnerable areas, coordinate intelligence across districts, and recommend preventive strategies before thefts occur.

Technology must become one of our strongest weapons. Meghalaya should gradually establish an integrated surveillance network covering major roads, market areas, parking zones, educational institutions, hospitals, petrol pumps, bus stands, and exit routes from towns. Modern Artificial Intelligence-assisted CCTV systems and Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) cameras installed at strategic entry and exit points can instantly identify suspicious vehicle movements, detect motorcycle/scooty without number plates, and alert law enforcement agencies when stolen vehicles pass through monitored checkpoints. Several Indian cities have already demonstrated the effectiveness of such systems in recovering stolen vehicles and tracing organised criminal activity.

Vehicle security itself must enter the digital era. Owners should be encouraged to install GPS tracking devices, particularly on new motorcycle/scooty. These devices have become increasingly affordable and can dramatically improve recovery rates. Insurance companies could offer premium discounts to owners who install certified anti-theft devices. Simultaneously, the Government should consider developing a Statewide Digital Stolen Vehicle Portal, integrated with the Meghalaya Police website and mobile platforms. Once a complaint is registered, photographs, registration details, engine numbers, and chassis numbers should be instantly accessible to every police station, highway patrol, transport enforcement team, and authorised workshop across the State. In vehicle theft investigations, the first few hours are often the most crucial.

Another overlooked aspect is parking security. Commercial establishments, shopping complexes, educational institutions, hospitals, and office campuses should be encouraged or where appropriate, mandated to provide secure parking facilities equipped with functioning CCTV cameras, adequate lighting, and trained parking attendants. Security should become part of customer service rather than an afterthought. Parking attendants should be trained not only to collect parking fees but also to identify and report suspicious behaviour immediately.

Community participation remains one of Meghalaya's greatest strengths. Our Dorbar Shnongs, market associations, resident welfare groups, and youth organisations have long demonstrated their ability to work collectively for public welfare. Without encouraging vigilantism, verified communication networks between local communities and nearby police stations using platforms such as WhatsApp or dedicated police applications could significantly reduce response times whenever suspicious activities or thefts are reported.

Another critical area requiring attention is the market for stolen spare parts. Motorcycle/scooty theft survives because there are buyers willing to purchase dismantled components without questioning their origin. Authorities should conduct regular inspections of second-hand vehicle dealers, repair workshops, scrap yards, and spare-parts businesses. Mandatory documentation, digital inventory records, and periodic verification of engines, frames, and major components would make it far more difficult for stolen motorcycles to disappear into the black market.

Public participation should also be encouraged through positive incentives. Meghalaya Police may consider introducing confidential reward schemes for credible information leading to the recovery of stolen vehicles or the arrest of habitual offenders. Citizens are often willing to assist law enforcement when they are assured of confidentiality and protection.

Equally important is intelligence-led policing. A dedicated database of repeat vehicle thieves, combined with close coordination among districts and neighbouring states, can reveal patterns that might otherwise go unnoticed. If these thefts are linked to organised interstate criminal networks, dismantling the entire syndicate should take precedence over merely arresting individual offenders.

Public awareness must also evolve. Every motorcycle/scooty owner should maintain digital copies of registration certificates, insurance documents, engine numbers, chassis numbers, and recent photographs of their vehicle. These simple precautions can significantly assist investigators and insurance companies should theft occur.

Ultimately, preventing motorcycle/scooty theft is not merely about buying stronger locks or asking citizens to be more careful. It is about building a smarter policing ecosystem where technology, intelligence, effective enforcement, institutional coordination, and community participation work together seamlessly.

Every stolen motorcycle/scooty represents months, sometimes years of hard-earned savings. For many families, it is the only means of travelling to work, transporting children to school, accessing healthcare, or earning a livelihood. The true measure of success should not simply be the number of motorcycle/scooty recovered after they disappear, but the number of thefts prevented before they occur.

Meghalaya has repeatedly shown that strong institutions and strong communities can work together to overcome challenges. This is another opportunity to do so. By embracing innovation, strengthening intelligence, investing in modern surveillance, and fostering active public participation, we can ensure that motorcycle/scooty theft becomes one of the most difficult crimes to commit rather than one of the easiest to escape.

Crime evolves. Our response must evolve even faster. Prevention, not merely recovery must become Meghalaya's highest priority.

Letters to the Editor

Coal Today, Consequences Tomorrow

Editor,

There is something truly inspiring about the urgency with which some groups and political voices are demanding the return of rat-hole coal mining. Their message is clear: why waste time thinking about tomorrow when we can extract everything today?

After all, the coal beneath our hills has been waiting patiently for us. It would be unfair to leave any of it underground for future generations. Our children and grandchildren might accidentally inherit clean rivers, healthy forests, and natural resources and we surely cannot allow such an irresponsible tradition to continue.

Perhaps the ban should be removed immediately. Let this generation take every last advantage. Let the trucks roll, the pits expand, and the hills disappear. And when future generations ask what happened to their natural heritage, we can proudly tell them: "We used it all. You're welcome."

For decades, vast quantities of coal were extracted from Meghalaya. But after all the digging, the question remains uncomfortable: where exactly is the great prosperity that coal was supposed to bring to ordinary people?

If coal mining had truly transformed the lives of local communities, mining areas would today be shining examples of development with excellent schools, modern healthcare facilities, strong roads, sustainable jobs, and thriving economies. Instead, many communities were left with the environmental costs while the financial benefits were concentrated elsewhere. The coal went out. The wealth went somewhere. The problems stayed behind.

The ban on rat-hole mining was criticised by many, but it also gave our damaged environment a chance to recover. Rivers that had suffered from years of pollution began to show signs of healing. Nature, in its quiet and stubborn way, proved something that we often forget: rivers do not need political speeches, they need protection.

Of course, livelihoods matter. Development matters. People need opportunities. But calling unlimited extraction "development" is like celebrating someone for selling the roof of their house because they needed money for dinner. It may solve today's problem, but it creates a much bigger one tomorrow. Natural resources are not private treasure chests belonging to one generation. They are a trust passed from those before us to those who come after us. We are not owners of the earth; we are temporary caretakers with a responsibility. Coal may bring quick money, but it cannot replace a river once it is poisoned, a forest once it is destroyed, or a landscape once it is permanently scarred. So perhaps the question should not be, "How much coal can we extract?"

Perhaps the wiser question is: "How much damage are we willing to leave behind?"

Because future generations will not judge us by how much coal we removed from the ground. They will judge us by whether we had the wisdom to leave something valuable behind.

Yours etc.,
Tynshain K Lyngdoh
Via email

Why the Bogeyman of 'Outsiders'

Editor,

The terms "outsiders" and "influx" are repeatedly invoked in public and political debates across Meghalaya. However, no enacted law of Meghalaya or any Act/Rule defines these expressions.

The repeated use of these terms would have been understandable if there were compelling empirical evidence of large-scale illegal migration from foreign territory into Meghalaya or settlement of non-tribals from other Indian states bypassing the land transfer act. However, the official statistics present a completely different picture. Only 688 illegal Bangladeshi nationals were caught in the five years period from 2021 to February 2026 as informed by the deputy chief minister in the Assembly which cannot be viewed as alarming considering the 443 Km of porous international border. In respect of land ownership in 1972, tribals owned nearly 95–97% of land which remained static as on date. This demonstrates that the existing constitutional and statutory safeguards, have been effective in protecting both tribal land and the demographic character of the State and there is no justification for an archaic ILP. Therefore, the expressions "outsiders" and "influx" are nothing but socio-political rhetoric aimed at particular group of people rather than enforceable legal concepts. Such rhetoric risks creating an unwarranted sense of suspicion towards permanent non-tribal residents of Meghalaya as well as fellow Indian citizens from other States, despite there being no legal basis for treating them as "outsiders." By the same logic, should the residents of Meghalaya travelling, working or settling in other parts of India be branded as an "outsider" and such movement treated as "influx"? Such an approach is contrary to the constitutional vision of India and should be stopped forthwith.

Yours etc.,
NK Kehar,
Shillong-3

The Destitute Families Left Behind Deserve Compensation

Editor,

The death of five people at Nongrah was unfortunate and a loss that can be felt and understood only by the family members. What is even more unfortunate is the death of the two brothers, Sunil Thakuri and Umesh Thakuri who rushed to help the three labourers trapped inside an underground water reservoir while they were cleaning it. It is indeed especially painful for the two men who rushed to the spot to help out of humanitarian concerns. All that mattered to the two was to help fellow human beings irrespective of who they may have been. They did not seem to have thought twice before lending a helping hand that took away their lives.

What is even more devastating is the glaring truth that the tragedy does not end with the loss of lives but it has left behind aged parents, a younger brother and two young children to confront an uncertain and painful future. They are now left to fend for themselves to survive.

At this hour the plight and condition of the family members of the deceased can only be imagined. While compensation should be extended to the family members by the contractor and house owner as the incident occurred at a private construction site the case should be further investigated to unravel the truth. The culprit should be apprehended and dealt with strictly by the court of law. As the incident does not fall within the categories covered by the State Disaster Response Fund, they are not eligible for ex-gratia assistance. The only hope for the grieving family is perhaps through the Chief Minister's Relief Fund which may extend financial assistance on humanitarian grounds to help them rebuild their lives. No financial aid can replace the loss of precious lives on that fateful evening but any form of financial assistance will certainly help ease the lives of those who are dependent on those now dead and gone.

While nothing can replace the lives lost, financial assistance and support can help ease the burden they have left behind. Let us hope that justice prevails and the bereaved family finds the strength they need to rebuild their lives.

Yours etc.,
Jenniefer Dkhar,
Via email

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

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"Living well is the best revenge."

— George Herbert

The Shillong Times

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Of Unfinished Projects

THE new Meghalaya State Assembly building, officially started in 2019 at Mawdiangdiang has been waylaid by shifting deadlines. This new building was necessitated because the old building at Khyndailad, constructed in 1937 was gutted in January 2001. It has been 25 years that the Assembly proceedings have been held in a building that was supposed to be an arts and culture venue at Rilbong. In any other state a building the size of the Meghalaya Assembly would not have taken more than two years but this building has taken seven years with no signs of completion anytime soon. Chief Minister Conrad Sangma was correct to walk out in irritation over the repeatedly shelved deadlines. In May 2022, construction was marred by the collapse of a 70-tonne dome which made headlines. Thankfully no one was hurt. The building costs Rs 177.7 crore, and the design for the entire building was vetted by IIT-Rourkee. Local engineers attribute the dome collapse to its weight which was far beyond what the columns and beams could carry.

The construction firm Uttar Pradesh Rajkiya Nirman Nigam Ltd (UPRNN) – a public sector undertaking under the Government of Uttar Pradesh—is perhaps not experienced in building over hilly terrains with rains playing spoilsport for nearly six months a year. A fact-check of the UPRNNL website shows this is a wholly state-owned construction and consultancy enterprise of the Uttar Pradesh Government established back in 1975. UPRNN was established ostensibly to eliminate middlemen and large private contractors to deliver all state-sponsored projects with optimal speed, quality and economy. This firm handles civil engineering and infrastructure work, project management and consultancy and executes projects for various government and semi-government entities. However, in the case of the Meghalaya Assembly building, UPRNN subcontracted the construction work to firms that had been disqualified during the tender evaluation stage. After UPRRN handed over the main building structure to the state government, the interior work of the assembly hall was allotted separately to local and New Delhi-based contractors, resulting in further delays. No construction work in Meghalaya has ever been completed on schedule, and no government building stands out for its architectural beauty or construction quality. There are far too many hiccups along the way. The state of our roads within Shillong city should indicate the quality of the Public Works Department which does not appear to follow any norms and standards. Roads repaired this year will last an average of six months after which they need repairs. Large sections of roads are built with no drainage system on the sides hence rain water cuts through the bitumen-laid road.

Meghalaya's problem is the absence of performance audits by the state government. Many schemes and projects are implemented in the breach and never reach conclusion. Forget about the results of the plethora of well-intentioned schemes. The MDA Government, now in its second term cannot claim success in any major project. A cursory glance at the report of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) will reveal the list of unfinished projects and pending utilisation certificates for projects allegedly completed. Without the utilisation certificates how can a project be assessed and the spendings authenticated. Unless there is a serious effort to streamline the PWD and PHE Departments which are big budget departments, development in Meghalaya will remain hamstrung.

Why the Invitation to Himanta Biswa Sarma was Wrong

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

The invitation of Himanta Biswa Sarma, Chief Minister of Assam, to the recently concluded Behdeinkhlam festival has left a bad taste in the mouth for five reasons, viz., Thal Shadap, Sik Talang, Chirup Sumer, Tal Nartiang, and Nikhasi Dhar. These are the names of the Khasis who were killed by Assam Police and Assam Forest Guards when they entered Meghalaya and, according to Conrad Sangma, the Chief Minister of the state, "resorted to unprovoked firing." An inquiry committee was promptly instituted, but to date no one has been prosecuted, and it appears unlikely that anyone will eventually be punished. These names will be added to the list of Khasis killed by Assam security forces who will never get justice, i.e., Columbus Hujon, Charles Lyngkhoi, Dennis Nonsiej, and Ekros Rani from Langpih. The police force in Assam operates under the Department of Home Affairs and is led directly by the Chief Minister. So, final accountability falls on Himanta Biswa Sarma not just because he is the Chief Minister of the state, but because he is directly in charge of the department that committed these killings.

Just a month ago, Khasi farmers in Lapangap were prevented from working in their fields. Both these incidents happened in Jaintia Hills, and Sein Raij is supposed to represent the Khasis in this district, i.e., the Pnar, who have continued to follow the traditional faith. These are Pnars who were harassed and killed. What must the inhabitants of Mukroh and Lapangap be thinking when they see Himanta Biswa Sarma invited and felicitated as a chief guest?

Around the same time, when Himanta Biswa Sarma was the chief guest, his Border Protection and Development Minister, Atul Bora, told the state Assembly that Meghalaya occupies 3,441.86 hectares of Assam land across five districts—Kamrup, Goalpara, Cachar, South Salmara-Mankachar, and West Karbi Anglong. Much of this land is in West Jaintia Hills. So, Assam is making it very clear that it has no intention of recognizing the rightful claim of the Khasis to their ancestral territory, and it is also looking to encroach on more of their land. What kind of message is Sein Raij sending to the people living in these border areas by inviting the head of the state whose government has publicly stated that it will claim more of the Khasis' ancestral land? Sein Raij might very well claim that this is a cultural festival and that it has nothing to do with politics. But inviting a political leader is a political act, especially when that individual is the Chief Minister of a state currently laying claim to their ancestral lands.

Meanwhile, while Sein Raij is pleased to have invited a highly distinguished guest, Khasis in Assam continue to live under difficult conditions. Recently, a group representing the Khasis from Assam sent a letter to Conrad Sangma asking for his support on issues relating to identity, education, cultural preservation, and socio-economic development. I know this group personally and have met them in the past. The road in their area is non-existent, and it is clear that they have been kept in a state of deprivation for a long time. These Khasis are Pnar speakers, and many of them still practice their indigenous faith. So, if these areas had been under Meghalaya, many of them would be members of Sein Raij and possibly taking part in the Behdeinkhlam festival in Jowai. What must these people be thinking when they see Sein Raij cozying up to the Chief Minister of the state that has kept them deprived for so long?

What exactly is happening in Assam that makes Sein Raij believe that Himanta Biswa Sarma has the best interests of the indigenous peoples? In Karbi Anglong, where much of the border conflict, particularly with the Pnar, is located, the Karbi have been demanding the eviction of illegal settlers from their territory. A Karbi was even killed during the agitation, but those illegal settlers have still not been evicted. In fact, they became so emboldened that they started shouting, "Karbi, go back to China." Similar slogans were raised against the Assamese in Guwahati, where non-Assamese groups chanted, "Assamese, go back." So, what was the repercussion for insulting the 'sons of the soil'?

On 6 July 2026, Hindi was officially introduced as the fourth official language of the Assam Legislative Assembly, alongside Assamese, English, and Bodo. Why was Karbi not accorded official recognition instead, given that the original owners of Guwahati—the very site where the slogans were raised—are the Karbi? This claim was made by Ranoj Pegu, Assam's Education Minister, during the oath-taking ceremony of the Karbi Welfare Autonomous Council. Ranoj Pegu himself belongs to the Mising (or Miri) community, which played a very important role in the evolution and development of Assamese culture and history.

Srimanta Sankardev was a 15th–16th century Assamese social-religious reformer and a key figure in the cultural and religious history of the Bhakti movement in Assam. He spearheaded the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam, and the Namghars that have become an integral part of Assamese culture were established by him. It was in Majuli, the stronghold of the Mising community, that Sankardev's movement gained many followers and strength. However, during a conversation at a workshop on Indigenous Peoples' rights in India, Pranab Doley, a Mising indigenous rights activist and politician, informed me that the community has long been struggling for inclusion under the Sixth Schedule as a means of more effectively protecting its land, territory, and cultural heritage. Doley himself was recently arrested while protesting against the construction of luxury hotels in Kaziranga which would have led to the displacement of indigenous peoples. Other indigenous peoples in Assam also share a similar history of struggle for their rights.

One is well aware of the Bodos' struggle for a homeland. For a long time, the demand of the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) was to "Divide Assam 50/50" and carve out a separate state on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra River. The Bodos, as part of the larger Kok-Borok linguistic group, which includes the Bodo, Dimasa, Garo, Tiwa, Hajong, Rabha, Koch, and Tripuri, are the second oldest group in the North East after the Khasi and the oldest in the Brahmaputra Valley. Before the arrival of the Ahoms, they had many kingdoms in the Brahmaputra Valley, including the Kachari Kingdom and the Koch Kingdom, which extended into Bengal. In fact, North Bengal should have been part of Assam, and there are colonial documents about Darjeeling mentioning that the Koch had a powerful kingdom along the Terai belt, i.e., in the foothills

However, the Bodos had to wage a bloody insurgency to secure the Bodo Accord, which set up the Bodoland Territorial Council. One of the most violent episodes was the 2008 bomb blasts in Assam, which killed 88 people and was perpetrated by the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). Violence has subsided now, but in 2022 the "Divide Assam 50:50" slogan resurfaced again in the BTAD (Bodoland Territorial Area Districts). The Karbi and the Dimasa have also been demanding the implementation of Article 244(A) to create an "autonomous state" within Assam to protect their territory and identity. The demand was also raised by Tuliram Ronghang, Chief Executive Member (CEM) of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), in the Assam Assembly only a month ago. More recently, Daniel Langthasa, the NPP candidate from Haflong, revealed that there have been demands to bifurcate Dima Hasao into two separate districts—one for the Dimasa and another for the non-Dimasa communities. Such a proposal is akin to dividing the areas under the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) and the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council (JHADC) into Khasi and non-Khasi administrative units to be governed separately.

Putting all this into context, and considering what is transpiring along the border, especially in West Jaintia Hills, it is perplexing and frustrating that Sein Raij decided to invite Himanta Biswa Sarma as the chief guest to a very important festival of the Pnar, when the Pnar are the ones who are suffering the most from the conflict. They will claim that it was not about politics and that, as an autonomous body, they have the right to invite anyone they see fit. But the kind of message it has sent to those living along the border and elsewhere in the state is deeply troubling. As an important socio-cultural organization, they needed to do better, and sadly they failed in this.

(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)

Byrnihat, Burnihat - The 'y' and 'u' matter...in pollution

By Banwan Lyngdoh

How many of those who have travelled the Shillong–Guwahati road have noticed the names Byrnihat and Burnihat? It is the 'y' and the 'u' that mark the boundary between Meghalaya and Assam: Byrnihat falls under Meghalaya, while Burnihat is Assam's. But ever since a Swiss company labelled "Byrnihat" the most polluted metropolitan area in the world in March 2025, the place has become a favourite subject for news portals and social-media creators; the so-called "influencers".

These influencers have tried hard to sway the uninitiated with their biased narratives. The formula is familiar: take Meghalaya's reputation as one of the cleanest and greenest states in the country, set it beside the "world's most polluted city," and the contrast writes itself. Videos built on this formula have crossed a million views. What almost none of them tell the viewer is where those damning numbers actually came from, and who has actually been acting on the problem.

But the pollution in Byrnihat is real and serious. Respiratory infection cases in the area rose from 2,082 in 2022 to 3,681 in 2024, a jump of 77 per cent, as per district health data. Nobody who has driven through the town in winter needs convincing. The people living there deserve clean air, and they also deserve an honest account of the problem. That honest account looks very different from the one circulating on the internet.

For clarity, Byrnihat is not a city, and it does not belong to one state. It is an industrial belt cut in two by the Assam-Meghalaya border, about 20 kilometres from Guwahati on the highway to Shillong. The officially demarcated industrial cluster measures about 6 square kilometres, of which 2.87 falls in Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya and 3.13 in Kamrup Metropolitan district of Assam.

Its one valley is governed by two governments and their two pollution control boards. The National Clean Air Programme lists Byrnihat under Meghalaya. The Central Pollution Control Board's list of critically polluted industrial clusters, prepared in 2018, names it "Byrnihat (Assam)" with a score of 78.31, among the worst in the country. The CPCB's daily air quality bulletins report the town's station as "Byrnihat, Assam". Even the Swiss company IQAir, whose report started the storm, places Byrnihat under Assam on its own website. Yet the headlines, almost without exception, say "Meghalaya's Byrnihat".

Until December 2025, the only real-time, round-the-clock air quality monitor in Byrnihat stood on the Assam side of the border, at the Central Academy for State Forest Service along the highway, run under the Pollution Control Board of Assam. It is this station that produced the headlines, including an AQI of 341 on January 26, 2025.

Meghalaya's side of the town was covered by four manual stations of the State Pollution Control Board, at the Export Promotion Industrial Park (EPIP), 15th Mile, 17th Mile and Khasi Killing, which recorded an annual PM2.5 average of 50.1 for 2024. That is high, but it is less than half the figure of 128.2 that made Byrnihat world famous.

When Chief Minister Conrad Sangma told the Assembly that the ranking rested largely on data from a monitor his government does not operate, in a state his government does not govern, he was stating a plain fact about where the machines stand.

The industrial picture tells a similar story. Meghalaya's side is anchored by the Export Promotion Industrial Park, a planned estate set up in 1996 with a single, named regulator. As per the figures placed before the public in March 2025, the Meghalaya side has about 41 units of which less than five fall in the red category, the classification reserved for the most polluting industries. It is also noteworthy that none of these red category industries were established under the current Government.

The Assam side, which grew as an unplanned cluster of coke ovens and cement grinding units on private land, has about 39 units of which around 20 are red category. Assam's own Pollution Control Board Chairman admitted that at least 10 of those units had not even installed pollution control devices. If one still doubts where the weight of the problem lies, consider what happened in February 2025.

The Meghalaya government had shut its Byrnihat industries, first six units in September 2024 and then seven more from end January to mid March 2025, for violations it made public. For the whole of February, the heavy industry on the Meghalaya side was substantially closed. The air did not clear. The Assam-side monitor continued to record readings in the very poor range while Meghalaya's stations read 92 which is satisfactory. The scientific study commissioned from CSIR-NEERI points the same way: road dust is the largest source of coarse dust, industries on both sides contribute the fine particles, and the endless truck traffic on the national highway, waste burning and the bowl-shaped valley that traps air in winter do the rest.

It is worth asking which government has actually acted - It is Meghalaya that closed its own revenue-earning units, imposed environmental compensation, made online emission monitoring compulsory, commissioned the NEERI study, installed its own real-time monitoring station in December 2025, and wrote to Assam proposing a joint committee, a proposal the Assam Chief Minister rightly welcomed.

When a viral video last month blamed an ethanol plant in the EPIP for the town's condition, the Pollution Control Board inspected the plant within days and published its findings. The plant, it may be noted, began production only in September 2024, after Byrnihat had already been declared critically polluted and ranked India's most polluted city. Blaming it for the ranking is putting the cart before the horse. Meanwhile, much of the imagery used in this coverage has been of factories that are not in Byrnihat at all, including stock photographs of snowy foreign landscapes and, lately, pictures generated by artificial intelligence.

None of this is a clean chit for Meghalaya's industries; the closed units were closed because they broke the rules, and enforcement must continue without fear or favour. But the need of the hour is not another viral video. It is a joint, empowered mechanism covering the entire cluster on both sides of the border, equal scrutiny of the Assam-side units, completion and publication of the NEERI source study, and correction of the official records that list one town under two states. The wind does not stop at the border, and neither should responsibility.

Byrnihat and Burnihat deserve serious attention, fairly directed. The people chasing followers will move on to the next sensation. The people of Byrnihat and Burnihat will still be breathing this air. And these YouTubers, running after viral views, should stop tarnishing our beautiful state sans facts for their own wallets.

Letters to the Editor

History Relies on Many Sources

Editor,

Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah's article, "Who Defines the Jaiñtia? History or Colonial Records?", is a timely response to Mr. Bhogtoram Mawroh's article on Jaiñtia identity. Dr. Kyndiah rightly points out that the history of a people cannot be understood by depending mainly on British colonial records while ignoring archaeology, linguistics, oral traditions, political history, and the community's own understanding of its identity.

I would also like to make one point very clear. We have no problem being called Jaiñtia or Synteng. We proudly call ourselves Jaiñtia, and we also accept Synteng as a historical and cultural name of our people. So, Mr. Mawroh's repeated discussion about the name itself misses the real issue. The question is not whether we are Jaiñtia or Synteng. The real question is whether a community has the right to define its own identity instead of having it defined only through colonial records.

It is also surprising that Mawroh repeatedly questions the origin of the word "Jaiñtia" but does not apply the same standard to the word "Khasi," whose origin is also debated by scholars. If he wants to examine the history of one name, fairness demands that he examine both in the same way. Otherwise, it appears that only the Jaiñtia identity is being singled out for doubt.

No historian today would say that British records alone decide who indigenous people are. Those records were written mainly for administration, not to give the final word on the history and identity of different communities. They are important sources, but they are only one part of the larger historical picture.

Nobody denies that the Khasi and Jaiñtia peoples share close historical, linguistic, and cultural ties. But sharing common roots does not mean they are the same people. Around the world, many communities share common ancestors but have developed their own distinct identities over time. The Jaiñtia are no different.

Dr. Kyndiah's article reminds us that history should be studied from many sources, not just colonial documents. The Jaiñtia identity did not begin with the British, nor does it depend on British records for its existence. It is built on centuries of history, culture, traditions, institutions, and the continued self-identification of the Jaiñtia people. That identity deserves respect, not repeated questioning.

Yours etc.,
Mantre H Dkhar,
Via email

Meghalaya Deserves Better

Editor,

There comes a point when silence is no longer a virtue but a form of surrender. I write this letter not out of bitterness toward Meghalaya, but out of love for the land I call home. We are blessed with breathtaking landscapes, abundant natural resources, vibrant cultures, and talented young people. Yet, despite these gifts, we continue to struggle with problems that should never have become permanent features of our society. Rising crime, unemployment, poor infrastructure, inadequate healthcare, an education system that continues to disappoint, and the growing frustration of our youth have become so common that we risk accepting them as normal. But normal does not mean acceptable.

Every election arrives with familiar promises. We are assured that jobs will be created, roads will improve, corruption will be tackled, schools will flourish, and development will finally reach every corner of the state. But post election citizens find themselves asking the same questions because the same problems remain. Our youth complete their education only to discover that opportunities are scarce. Many leave Meghalaya in search of livelihoods elsewhere, while others remain behind hoping that tomorrow will be kinder than today. Farmers continue to work tirelessly, often earning less than they deserve, while small businesses struggle against inadequate infrastructure and limited support.

Whenever crime rises, governments promise stronger policing and tougher enforcement. Those measures are necessary, but they are only part of the solution. Crime does not appear in a vacuum. Most unemployed people never become criminals, and every individual remains responsible for the choices they make. Yet we cannot ignore that prolonged unemployment, poor education, substance abuse, weak institutions, and limited opportunities create conditions where crime finds fertile ground. Treating only the symptoms while neglecting the causes is no solution.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy is not poverty itself but the gradual loss of hope. Society becomes truly vulnerable when its youth begin believing that hard work no longer guarantees opportunity. That is when frustration replaces ambition, and cynicism replaces faith in public institutions. Development does not mean inaugurating new projects or announcing ambitious plans. Development is measured by whether ordinary families feel safer, whether children receive quality education, whether graduates can find meaningful employment, and whether farmers and workers can build dignified lives without leaving their homeland.

What troubles many citizens even more is the visible contrast between everyday hardship and the comforts enjoyed by those who occupy positions of power. Across Shillong, countless families struggle to pay rent, postpone medical treatment, and worry about the next school fee. Farmers endure uncertain incomes despite feeding the state. Meanwhile, expensive luxury vehicles continue to appear on our roads long before the roads themselves are worthy of them. Again, there is nothing inherently wrong with driving a BMW or a Mercedes-Benz. Honest success should never be condemned. The concern arises when such displays of privilege exist alongside widespread public hardship and declining trust in governance.

Stories of lavish residences owned by political leaders and government officials, imported luxury materials, and extravagant lifestyles often circulate whenever discussions about public accountability arise. Whether every story is true or exaggerated is not the central issue. The very fact that such questions persist reflects a deeper problem—a crisis of public confidence. Citizens naturally begin asking: if public servants are entrusted with safeguarding public resources, where does extraordinary wealth come from? If every asset has been acquired honestly, transparency should answer that question without hesitation. If not, the law should. Public office is not merely about avoiding corruption; it is about demonstrating integrity in a manner that earns the confidence of those whose taxes sustain the institutions of government.

Leadership is never been defined by the size of an official convoy, the comfort of a government residence, or the prestige of a political title. Leadership is measured by whether the weakest citizen feels protected, whether taxpayers believe their money is being spent wisely, and whether future generations inherit a state that offers greater opportunities than the one before it. Public office is a sacred trust, not a reward for political success.

This letter is not written to place every burden solely upon those in government. Democracy demands responsibility from citizens as well. We must reject vote-buying, refuse to normalize corruption, demand transparency, and judge leaders by their actions rather than their speeches. We cannot complain about broken governance while rewarding the very practices that weaken it. Accountability begins at the ballot box but does not end there.

To those entrusted with governing Meghalaya, I ask only this: when history reflects upon your years in office, what legacy do you hope it will remember? Will it remember promises repeated, or lives transformed? Will it remember official ceremonies, or schools strengthened, hospitals improved, roads completed, honest institutions built, and meaningful employment created? The measure of leadership is not how comfortably those in power lived, but how much better ordinary citizens lived because of their leadership.

Despite everything, I remain hopeful because Meghalaya possesses extraordinary potential. Our people are hardworking, resilient, and capable of remarkable achievements when given the opportunity. What we need is governance that matches the strength of our people—governance rooted in integrity, transparency, competence, and genuine public service rather than political convenience.

One question that deserves an honest answer is: if the people continue to struggle while those entrusted with serving them continue to prosper, who is truly benefiting from the wealth of our state?

Yours etc.,
Pdianghun Mawlong,
Nongstoiñ

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"Water, air, and cleanness are the chief articles in my pharmacy."

— **Napoleon Bonaparte**

The Shillong Times

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Optimism, parliament

OPTIMISM is high as the Monsoon Session of Parliament begins on Monday, with a declaration from the government that it would push through two major legislations—Women's Reservation and Constituency Delimitation—that would require a two-thirds majority support. Its attempt to pass these failed in April. But, with a reconfiguration of political forces, mainly involving regional parties, the BJP feels confident the bills will get the required support this time. The BJP worked overtime in recent months to effect a turnaround while situations also conspired to give the NDA an added advantage. The BJP-inspired split in the AAP, which saw the defection of a significant number of the regional party's MPs to the former's side was one such instance. The downfall of the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, where the BJP captured power, also saw several of Mamata Banerjee's MPs shifting their allegiance to the BJP. That process is ongoing. The split in the Shiv Sena (UBT), also with encouragement from the BJP, won the NDA the support of a few more MPs. The sudden political changes in Tamil Nadu, where the Congress sided with the TVK government of actor Joseph Vijay, irritated the DMK so much that it exited the INDIA bloc and gave hints of a neutral stand in national politics.

All these were music to the BJP's ears. Now, it is confident of mustering a two-thirds majority in Parliament to push through the two significant legislations and more. The women's reservation bill has been waiting to be passed long enough to ensure 33 percent reservation for women in Parliament and state assemblies starting from the 2029 general election. Clubbing the bill with the delimitation legislation was a strategic move by the Modi government though the two issues are interlinked. Now that optimism is high about its passage, the BJP is likely to seek and get more support from women across the country for having gotten this through. The delimitation legislation, which would grant more MP seats to the Hindi-belt states where the population has risen significantly in recent years will also benefit the BJP, the main political establishment there.

The BJP also has reason to cheer because the NDA will no longer depend on one or two parties for the Modi government's sustenance. The splits in regional parties and the change in the DMK's mood will give more flexibility to the present parliamentary scenario. Since the NDA failed to get a majority in the 2024 polls, the government was dependent on the JDU and Telugu Desam for its existence. Their bargaining power will reduce now with more support coming to the ruling alliance from the split regional groups and their MPs. Constituency delimitation was also long awaited after the new Parliament House arranged more seats to accommodate double the current number of MPs, but how this will play out on regional equations in national politics and Parliament will be closely watched. The legislation should ensure that the regional balance in Parliament is maintained at all costs. The BJP should avoid the temptation to play politics to its own advantage.

Tragedy for Some; Football Frenzy & Foreign Jaunts for Others

By Patricia Mukhim

This month alone in Meghalaya, tragedy has befallen four families who lost their sons/husbands on Friday July 10 and another two families that lost their children on July 15. In the first instance death was caused due to leakage of toxic carbon monoxide gas inside a water tank that was set to be repaired using a diesel engine. Diesel engines are known to emit poisonous, colourless, and odourless gas if operated in a closed space and the carbon monoxide and other toxic exhaust fumes quickly accumulate to lethal levels. That's the reason why five lives were lost on that fateful day at Lapalang. The two brothers who heard the cry for help and rushed to save the three labourers trapped inside that hell hole—the entrance into which was just 3 square ft but whose depth was 30-35 feet—never came out alive.

Even before people could come to terms with the first disaster another one struck. In Umtangling village, in the Umroi area, Ri Bhoi district three children were electrocuted because they stepped on live wires. An overhead 11 kV power line snapped and fell across a village road. The children, who were walking by, were completely unaware that the high-voltage wire was live and accidentally touched it, ending their miserable lives. Miserable because despite the village headman having informed the MeECL no one responded to that urgent call perhaps because the caller wasn't important enough – not a VIP or a rich elite. Of the three who died, two are siblings aged 11 and 12 years. So, a family has lost two kids just like that. Their hopes and dreams were killed by an electrical fault that was left unattended. Anywhere else the MeECL would have had to pay huge compensation. But how can poor families even approach a court of law for redressal?

India is a country where human lives are dispensable. This is repeated again and again because no one is held accountable for the loss of precious lives. In the first instance the contractor responsible for repairing the water pump should have followed some safety measures. Firstly the labourers sent inside were not trained for the technical work required of them. One of them, Pynskhemlang Mawthoh had never worked outside his village in Thangsning. The set rule is that tools powered by gasoline, propane, or diesel should never be used in enclosed spaces. Even with open doors and windows, these spaces can trap carbon monoxide and allow it to quickly build to lethal levels. In fact in advanced countries carbon monoxide alarms are fitted to such spaces where such equipment is used.

Operating any combustion engine—whether diesel, petrol, or propane—inside a confined area like the 33-foot-deep well in Dong Madan, Lapalang, is an extreme safety violation. The recent tragedy resulting in the deaths of three workers and two rescuers underscores the fact that occupational safety standards were violated. Reports have stated that enclosed spaces and fuel engines are a deadly mix due to rapid toxin accumulation. Internal combustion engines generate high levels of carbon monoxide (CO), a colourless, odourless, and highly toxic gas. In a deep, narrow well, these heavy fumes trap easily and cannot disperse. At high concentrations, carbon monoxide replaces oxygen in the bloodstream almost *instantly*. Authorities on the subject state that the gas can knock a person unconscious in less than 30 seconds, leaving no time to climb out or call for help. Because the gas is invisible, family members or bystanders often rush into the confined space to help, unaware of the atmospheric hazard. This is tragically how the two brothers in Lapalang lost their lives. It is precisely to prevent such workplace disasters that specific safety precautions must be enforced. In the Lapalang case this was violated, resulting in 5 deaths. Can the contractor then get away with some superfluous explanations?

Safety protocols demand that all generators and fuel-powered water pumps must always remain above the ground in open air at least 20 feet away from any opening or vents. Only the suction hoses or electrical lines should extend down into the well. Before any worker steps inside an underground chamber, the air must be tested using a gas detector to ensure oxygen levels are safe and toxic gases are absent. Forced-air blowers must actively pump fresh air from the surface down to the bottom of the pit throughout the duration of the work.

Above all—and this is the most critical part—workers entering a deep well must wear a safety harness connected to a surface tripod. A trained standby person must remain at the top, equipped to crank the worker out mechanically without ever entering the toxic environment themselves.

Following the incident, law enforcement authorities registered a criminal case against the property owner and contractor for negligence under Section 106(1) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS). But whether this will be just one of many violations that will fall by the wayside is anybody's guess. No one really cares about *human lives* especially when those are the lives of the poor and voiceless. The media too has a responsibility not to forget this case as yet another unfortunate accident but to follow it up regularly so that another similar accident is avoided and those who violated safety norms to cut cost receive due punishment and do not repeat such criminal acts elsewhere.

Another important question that needs probing is whether the contractor got permission to use that equipment inside a 30-35 feet hole. Who gave him the permission? Was it the Dorbar Shnong? If so is the Dorbar Shnong the competent authority to decide the safety protocols? Should the contractor not have taken permission from the State Pollution Control Board which has qualified people to decide the safety protocols?

Interestingly, in 2021 the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council was empowered to grant building permissions in areas outside the Shillong Municipality. The Khasi Hills Building Structure Regulatory Authority (KHBSRA) was created to implement the Meghalaya Building Bye Laws 2021. It is not known why the Councils wanted this power because they hardly inspect a building for which they have granted building permissions. Their concern about buildings coming up without any regulations continues to happen today when the Councils are holding that power. Houses are built right on the rivers with no respect for the regulations which state that buildings near rivers up to 3 metres wide should follow a setback of 3 metres, meaning that they must build 3 metres away from the river. For rivers wider than 3 metres, the setback is 6 metres. And buildings near the Umiam Lake should observe a setback of 50 metres. Septic tanks and wastewater treatment facilities must maintain a minimum distance of 6 metres from adjacent water bodies. Are these regulations being observed by all who have built homes post 2021? It would be good if the present Council inspects, along with the building permissions, all those who have built their homes by the rivers and the Umiam lake. Every building regulation has been violated. How? Perhaps by paying money to the inspecting authorities.

Meghalaya is one state where the rule of law is flagrantly violated. Earlier the Meghalaya High Court under Chief Justice Sanjeeb Banerjee kept a strict vigil on this aspect but now it appears the High Court has other pressing priorities than the state of our rivers, many of which have turned into drains.

Coming to the case of the three children who were electrocuted, this too is a case of sheer negligence by the MeECL. But as of writing this article it is not known whether anyone has been held accountable for this crime for that is what it is. What is the response time of the MeECL for such a serious complaint – the snapping of an 11 KV overhead power line – from citizens? Can this question be answered for our benefit?

And now let me come to the more newsy bit. While these sad events are happening here, some of our honourables are enjoying their sponsored trips abroad to watch the much touted FIFA World Cup. The upcoming finals will be held at New Jersey, USA. Ticket prices range from $7000 (Rupees 6.74 lakh to $40,000 (38.54 lakh) each. In fact the ticket prices are among the most expensive in World Cup history but not too expensive from some of our ministers (let's not embarrass them by mentioning names). However they don't really need to shell out money from their pockets, do they? There are enough wealthy contractors who can foot the bill. The money will come back in circuitous form from the roads and buildings of the government.

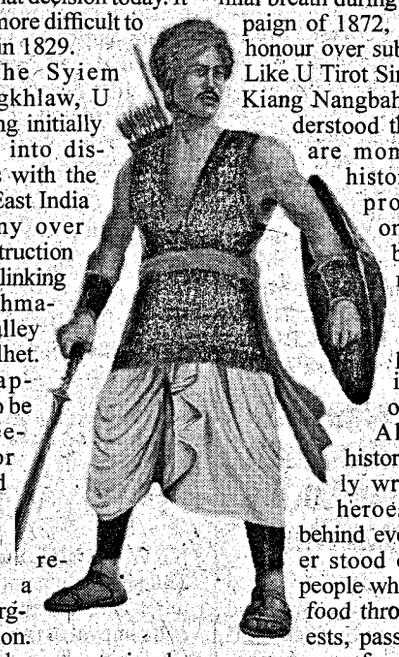
This is Meghalaya as we know it today. The poor are sinking into deeper poverty. The few who know to make money from politics and business are the only ones who thrive in this state! Unfortunate ones die because they stepped on lives wires or because they entered a gas chamber. What a life indeed!

Going Beyond Symbolic Observances

By Shivani Pde

Today on 17th July 2026, across Meghalaya, wreaths will be laid, speeches will be delivered and tributes will be paid to U Tirot Sing. As they should be. Heroes deserve to be remembered but remembrance should never become routine. Every statue we pass, every road named in someone's honour and every public holiday tells the story of a real person who once stood at a crossroads and made a choice. For U Tirot Sing, that choice was clear. When faced with the prospect of surrendering the sovereignty of his land, he chose resistance. It is easy to admire that decision today. It was far more difficult to make it in 1829.

"As the Syiem of Nongkhlaw, U Tirot Sing initially entered into discussions with the British East India Company over the construction of a road linking the Brahmaputra Valley with Sylhet. What appeared to be an agreement for trade and connectivity soon revealed a much larger intention."



As the Syiem of Nongkhlaw, U Tirot Sing initially entered into discussions with the British East India Company over the construction of a road linking the Brahmaputra Valley with Sylhet. What appeared to be an agreement for trade and connectivity soon revealed a much larger intention. The road was not simply about movement. It represented influence, control and the gradual erosion of the independence that the Khasi States had long enjoyed. When that became clear, U Tirot Sing refused to remain a silent spectator.

The Anglo Khasi War that followed was never a battle between equals. The British possessed better weapons, larger armies and greater resources. The Khasi warriors had none of these advantages. What they possessed instead was an intimate knowledge of their land and an unwavering belief that their homeland was worth defending. They fought from the forests and hills they knew so well, proving that courage is not measured by the size of an army but by the strength of conviction.

The struggle continued for several years before U Tirot Sing was captured in 1833 through deception and later exiled to Dhaka. Far away from the hills he loved and fought to protect, he passed away on 17 July 1835. He never returned home. Perhaps that is why his story still moves us nearly two centuries later. His greatest legacy was not military victory. It was the courage to stand firm when surrender would have been easier. That is why generations of Meghalayans continue to honour him, not merely as a historical figure, but as a symbol of dignity, leadership and the right of every people to protect their identity.

The story of Meghalaya's resistance was never carried on the shoulders of one man alone: Years after U Tirot Sing's sacrifice, another son of these hills would rise. U Kiang Nangbah led the people of the Jaintia Hills against British interference in their traditional institutions and way of life. His courage inspired thousands to stand together in defence of their rights. Though he was captured and publicly executed on 30 December 1863, his death could not silence the ideals for which he fought. His name continues to echo through Meghalaya's history as a reminder that freedom always demands sacrifice.

The Garo Hills too produced its own hero. Pa Togan Nengminja Sangma refused to yield when British forces advanced into Garo territory. He fought until his final breath during the campaign of 1872, choosing honour over submission. Like U Tirot Sing and U Kiang Nangbah, he understood that there are moments in history when protecting one's land becomes more important than protecting one's own life. Although, history is rarely written by heroes alone, behind every leader stood ordinary people who carried food through forests, passed messages from village to village, sheltered those on the run and quietly accepted unimaginable risks for a future they themselves might never see. Among them were women whose names have largely disappeared from our history books but whose resilience helped sustain these struggles. Their stories may not appear in examinations or memorials, but they remain woven into the very identity of Meghalaya.

In a rapidly changing world, remembering these stories has become more important than ever. Our children today can easily name international leaders and distant historical events. They should also know the names of those who defended these hills long before India became an independent nation. They should understand that the freedom they enjoy today was shaped not only in Delhi, Kolkata or Mumbai, but also in Nongkhlaw, Jowai and the Garo Hills. History is not merely about looking backwards but It is about understanding who we are.

As we observe the death anniversary of U Tirot Sing, let us honour him in the best possible way. Let us also remember U Kiang Nangbah, Pa Togan Nengminja Sangma and the countless known and unknown men and women whose courage protected the identity of this land. Their stories belong not only in museums and commemorative speeches, but in our classrooms, our conversations and our collective memory. After all, nations are not built only by those who govern them. They are built first by those who refuse to give them away, and by those brave souls who stood like a wall protecting Meghalaya like the true warrior that they were & will always be remembered.

"In a rapidly changing world, remembering these stories has become more important than ever. Our children today can easily name international leaders and distant historical events. They should also know the names of those who defended these hills long before India became an independent nation."

Letters to the Editor

Negative Consequences of Politicizing Culture on the Federation

Editor,

In his editorial published in The Shillong Times titled, "Inviting Assam CM Himanta Sarma to Behdeinkhlam leaves a bad taste in the mouth," Bhogtoram Mawroh decided to use culture for political gains. This was done at the expense of ignoring the very essence of Indian federalism: economic development and politics must not be held hostage to local disputes.

Applying this logic uniformly will bring all wheels of inter-state commerce, industrial growth, and academia spinning to a standstill in India.

Take for instance the recent case of a high-level government delegation led by the Chief Minister of Meghalaya, Conrad Sangma, visiting Genome Valley in Hyderabad, Telangana, to witness first-hand developments in biotechnology, healthcare, and life sciences. Would it be justified for the activists in Telangana to have obstructed this industry visit?

Definitely yes, according to Mr. Mawroh's thinking. The activists could have pointed out the long history of extreme discrimination and acts of violence carried out against non-tribal people, within the premises of Shillong itself. They could have brought up the case of Lawsohtun in 2020 when a group of non-tribal boys playing basketball were shut in the court and beaten up with iron rods and sticks, an act widely condemned even by veteran journalist Patricia Mukhim.

Likewise, the 2019 incident involving NIT Meghalaya could also be cited since the minor fight soon developed into an all-out locals versus outsiders altercation. Given that many students studying in NIT Meghalaya are from the Telugu-speaking region, the matter was of particular significance to Telangana. In this incident, a bus belonging to the college full of students who were not natives of the area was pelted with stones by people affiliated with the local student's union as it entered the Mawlai area dominated by tribals.

If the people of Telangana had prevented Chief Minister Sangma from visiting the Genome Valley by using these incidents where Telugu students were targeted, people could well term such actions as ridiculous and detrimental to the nation's development. However, this very discriminatory policy is what the writer wishes to impose on Meghalaya's cultural festivals.

Behdeinkhlam festival is highly spiritual in nature aimed at overcoming evil and bringing peace. Inviting a Chief Minister from another state showed the real spirit of hospitality and diplomacy of the Sein Raij. Disputes at the borders, however old and bitter, can always be sorted out through continuous and high-level political negotiations and not by isolating other states from your cultural events.

What is more, the attempt of the author to present a wholly antagonistic image of the neighbouring community's government does not hold its ground within the wider regional perspective. As Mawroh discusses territorial problems such as Bodoland, it is important to maintain borders. Calling for a separate state or autonomy is a legitimate part of political discussions within a democracy, but utilizing historical sub-nationalist discourse to support aggression towards neighbouring states is likely to lead to sympathizing with troublemakers.

Being a leader is all about compartmentalization. If leaders only associate themselves with people with whom they do not have disagreements, then there would be no exchange between any two states in India. Himanta Biswa Sarma's invitation does not mean betrayal of the border people, but rather signifies maturity. Disconnecting Meghalaya from any leaders from outside and undermining the culture of the state will not solve the border problem.

Yours etc.,
Hrishikesh Raychaudhuri,
Via email

Places of Worship Have No Place on Government Office Premises

Editor,

The recent locking of an under-construction temple within the premises of the CBI office by the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) has once again brought into focus an important constitutional question: Should places of worship be constructed on public property, especially within government office premises?

This issue should not be viewed through the lens of religion. It is about the constitutional character of the Indian State and the proper use of public property.

India is a secular republic. The Constitution guarantees every citizen the freedom to profess, practise and propagate religion under Article 25. However, this right is not absolute. Article 25 itself makes religious freedom subject to public order, morality, health, and other provisions of Part III of the Constitution. Equally important, it does not confer a right to construct a place of worship on government land.

Government offices exist to serve citizens irrespective of religion, caste, or belief. Their premises are public property maintained from taxpayers' money and should remain religiously neutral. The presence of a temple, church, mosque, or any other place of worship within a government office creates an impression that the State is favouring one religion over another, which is inconsistent with the secular spirit of the Constitution.

The Supreme Court of India, while dealing with the issue of unauthorised religious structures on public land, has repeatedly expressed concern over the encroachment of public spaces. In Union of India v. State of Gujarat (2009), the Court directed all States and Union Territories not to permit unauthorised construction of temples, churches, mosques, or other religious structures on public streets, parks, and public places, and to formulate policies for dealing with existing encroachments. Acting on these directions, governments across the country have issued policies prohibiting new religious structures on public land without lawful authority.

The principle behind these directions is simple: public land belongs to everyone and must be used for public purposes. Government offices are meant for administration, not religious activities.

If a temple is permitted within a government office today, on what legal basis can another department refuse permission for a church, mosque, gurdwara, or monastery tomorrow? The State cannot adopt different standards for different religions. Equality before the law, guaranteed under Article 14, demands neutrality.

This is not an argument against religion. Citizens are free to build and maintain places of worship on private land or on land lawfully allotted for that purpose. What should not happen is the conversion of government premises into religious spaces, irrespective of which religion is involved.

The controversy should therefore be resolved not through agitation or political rhetoric but by applying the Constitution and the law uniformly. If the structure has been constructed without lawful approval and in violation of government policy, the District Administration should act in accordance with the law. Conversely, if all statutory approvals exist, those should be made public to ensure transparency and maintain public confidence.

In a diverse country like India, the neutrality of State institutions is one of the strongest safeguards of religious freedom. Government offices must remain places where every citizen feels equally represented—not places where the State appears to identify with any particular faith.

Yours etc.,
Mantre H Dkhar,
Via email

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"Good actions give strength to ourselves and inspire good actions in others."

—Samuel Smiles

The Shillong Times

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Progress of Cockroaches

THE arrogance of the apex court found eloquent expression when the Chief Justice of India Surya Kant made a provocative statement trashing social activists as 'cockroaches' and brought down the dignity of what was a hallowed hall of justice. A young techie from Maharashtra based in Boston, US, unleashed an instant storm on the internet – the reigning platform for people's voice – by challenging the establishment and announcing the formation of the Cockroach Janata Party, which had shades of both Jaiprakash Narayan's Total Revolution movement and Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party in its nomenclature. It proved to be a huge hit with millions of young Indians virtually jumping onto its bandwagon, drawing significantly more members than the ruling BJP. Yet, on the ground, in a telling commentary on the changing mores, nothing much has happened after the new party's founder Abhijeet Dipke flew down to the national capital and went into action mode. Admittedly, this was not a movement of the hoi polloi. This was conceived as an offensive by the intelligent, educated, socially conscious young generation with an anti-establishment mindset. Their social frenzy, however, is limited to social media.

Political establishments, many drunk with power and others lacking the nerve to take on the establishment, watched from a distance to see how the Cockroaches would proceed. Situations conspired to undercut the storm that Dipke and his swarm of 'followers' sought to unleash. In this state of disappointment, Sonam Wangchuk emerged. The prominent climate activist based out of Ladakh, is now the central focus of the CJP and the dharna it holds at Jantar Mantar. With a defiant Modi dispensation refusing to accept the demand for the resignation of Education Minister, Dharmendra Pradhan-- a shameless symbol of India's huge system failures—activist Wangchuk's life is in danger. The movement itself faces odds. With no organisational heft, and politicians as a class standing united against any change in the corrupt systems, the way forward for this movement is worth watching.

Wangchuk and Dipke represent the collective conscience of a generation uncomfortable with the establishment's drift from its avowed goals. When millions raised a storm on the Internet, it reflected the unpopularity of the Modi government, which is failing on multiple fronts. Joblessness among the educated segments of society is a serious issue defying solutions. Social progress is limited to a small section of the 1.4 billion people. The manufacturing sector is failing to regain steam, partly due to the corrupt systems, and a parliamentary panel is expressing serious concern over slow private investment and FDI outflow. These situations are compounded by a failure of the Monsoon, which would imperil food production. The establishment continues its ambivalent attitude, having poured cold water on the hopes of millions of young minds who painstakingly prepared for the NEET exam. Established political parties have lost their nerve to take on the government. It is in this grim scenario that Dipke and Wangchuk emerged from nowhere and sought to build mass support. They deserve a standing ovation but above all the support of all right-thinking Indians who still believe in the power of democracy and the culture of protest.

Economisation: Parliamentary, Legislative Council, Local Bodies and Municipal Expenditures

By Melarbor Thabah

India is a nation profuse with elections where billions of rupees of public money are spent every 5 years for holding elections of sheer opulence that could have been spent to better people's lives by sanctioning government jobs in service departments like Police, Education, Health, PWD, PHED, Municipal, and Power. Considering the increasing population, public services need to increase commensurately. This should be the top most priority to create stable financial jobs. Though elections are important, introspection into municipal elections which are not indispensable, is needed to eradicate such unnecessary elections. There is also a need to limit and put a final bar on the number of legislators—MPs, MLAs, and Legislators in the local bodies of the Autonomous District Councils and Panchayats. There is also a need to jettison the Legislative Councils. All these factors seep away the nation's financial resources. Here is my elaboration on the statement made above.

Municipal Elections: A state like Delhi, as a case study, spends approximately ₹18 crores for conducting municipal elections. The figures will be more or less the same in the remaining states. States spend crores of rupees per year for the salaries of mayors, deputy mayors, councillors also known as ward commissioners. The election money spent on frivolous municipal elections could have been better utilized for other resource allocation demands.

Rajya Sabha MPs: The Central Government allocates approximately ₹99 crore per year exclusively for the salaries, allowances and direct travel benefits for the 250 Rajya Sabha MPs. Such extra expenses could have been curtailed for developing the nation's vital critical socio-economic infrastructure.

State MLCs: The collective spending of the preferentially treated six states which have Members of the Legislative Councils (MLCs) totalling 405 MLCs is approximately ₹61 crores per year spent for their salaries, allowances and direct travel benefits are determined entirely by the respective State Legislatures under Article 195 has negligible expense variations between states drawn completely from the Consolidated Fund of the State for which money could have been spent for other important needs of those states.

Curative Proposition for Municipalities: Articles 243P to 243ZG including the 74th amendment must be re-amended to discontinue elections at all levels of the municipalities, renaming and converting those posts to executive promotional posts akin to government servants based on promotion thus functioning like a government department. India's habit of replicating colonial era functioning styles is bland which necessitates changes.

Curative Proposition for the Rajya Sabha: Article 80 which calls for establishing 250 seats in the Rajya Sabha (12 nominated MPs and 238 MPs elected only by MLAs), needs to be mandatorily amended to 100 seats: 95 MPs elected by MLAs and 5 nominated MPs from any subject, service, sport or profession. The 5 nominated MPs will hold this post for 3 years and the remainder 3 years can be interchanged from amongst those subjects - services et.al. Nominated MPs should speak on various state and national issues. A subsequent amendment bill must be introduced and enacted into law whereby the remainder 150 seats in the Rajya Sabha must be transferred to the Lok Sabha to make it to 643 seats with an additional sanction of 7 more seats to make a round figure of 700 Lok Sabha seats which should never ever be increased to economize public spending and promote austerity.

Reasons for 100 seats in Rajya Sabha: These members are not directly elected by the people but by MLAs exclusively. Transferring these 150 seats to the Lok Sabha is innately logical because Lok Sabha MPs are directly elected by the people and hence holds more weightage. A nation like the USA which is more than 9.9 million square kilometres in size has an Upper House called the Senate with exactly 100 senators. India is three times smaller than the US. Having 250 MPs, which involves an extra step for bill retention and passage, especially since these MPs are elected solely by MLAs, demands curtailment for economization.

Equitable Credo Seat Distribution: The 150 seats transferred from the Rajya Sabha to the Lok Sabha, along with the 7 additional seats sanctioned for the Lok Sabha should be allocated to Indian regions neglected for the past 7 decades, such as Naxalite areas, North East India, the islands and other parts of India facing underdevelopment due to under-representation. Strategically important regions must be properly represented like the disputed and largest state of North East India, Arunachal Pradesh which has only 2 MPs to represent this whole state instead of 10 MPs as is the case with disputed Ladakh UT. The extremely strategic Andaman and Nicobar Islands which are widely disbursed and sparsed requires representation per habitable island. These three strategic areas which are main focal points of China, mandates thorough representation. North Eastern states, where the population is widely dispersed across large regions, require an increase in Lok Sabha seats. It is illogical and unfathomable that the MP scheme of only 5 crores per annum be distributed by an MP to 7-8 districts where the increasing population ranges from 1.5 to 2 million people. Under- representation in the Lok Sabha is one of the many reasons for under-development and stagnated backwardness in areas of India, often compounded by less weighted speeches from our MPs who are allowed to speak only when the parliamentary session is nearly over and most MPs have left at the session's end dates. This is brazen discrimination of the highest order by the parliament secretariat.

Population should never be the sole barometer for determining the number of seats since this incentivizes population explosion like Uttar Pradesh which has to reproduce rapidly to maintain their 80 MP dominance at the Lok Sabha. Few states by virtue of their high population do not represent the entire nation. The current barometer represents a regressive mentality where over population and resulting pollution is rewarded. Factors such as "Size of the State" and "Geographical Strategic Importance" should also be given utmost weightage.

Curative Proposition for Legislative Councils: Articles 169 and 171, which call for the establishment of Legislative Councils must be revoked in its entirety to enable the 6 states to spend this allotted public money for development with prudent financial utilization. State Legislative Assemblies are fully equipped to deal with all State issues.

Women's Reservation: The Indian Government must recognize that India has become a "Reservation State," which the world has noted. Women's reservation in politics must strictly be 2% out of the existing number of seats either at the Parliament, Assembly et.al strictly. More than 2% would further enhance India's reservation country status. Playing reservation politics for votes at the expense of economization and overall development of India sets a bad precedence.

Analysis on Reservation: Financial frugality is also caused by reservations demanding extra sanctioned seats for SCs, STs, OBCs, Women at the central, state and local bodies. It is my expressed logical opinion that reservation as a whole must be rooted out in all its forms on August 15, 2047 which will mark 100 years of India's independence. For the remaining 26 years, Indian governments must henceforth ensure that the non-creamy layer - poor people from rural and urban areas should merit 70% of the reservation. One should never forget that the main aim of reservation is to uplift those who had been disenfranchised by the caste system and geographical location of the poor rural tribals of North East India and the islands.

Reservation classification of non-creamy poor must be based on the Socio-Economic Census and NITI Council classification of poverty which must be in consonance with UNDP, WB and IMF classification of poverty. No representative should sign any document certifying a person as BPL to avoid any unwanted political interference across India. Only a collegium of experts at the district level should decide who is a BPL following the set criterias. The Father of the Constitution BR Ambedkar had said that Reservation is "Provisional" and the Supreme Court has stated that "Reservation cannot go on forever".

Seats Number in the Panchayats and District Councils: The number of seats in the 3 Levels of Panchayats must have limits and the Autonomous Councils must have a maximal 30 seats and minimal 25 seats irrespective of the population to minimize state and central expenditure allocation. Quality governance in lieu of quantity is paramount.

Economization: "Economize" is key for maximizing socio-economic development of the country. Whether they are Municipal elections, existence of State Legislative Councils, existence of 250 members in the Rajya Sabha, Local body seats and Reservation manifestation demands, tantamounts to financial frugality. By expunging avertable entities, economic resources can be prudently utilized to take India and its people to great heights where the terms economization and economize assume their true meaning and projection.

Let's borrow a little bit of the fire from Jantar Mantar

By Dalariti Nongpiur

How can I be sitting here and not be in awe at what is happening at Jantar Mantar? How can I not marvel at their anger? In times when public relations and influencers have replaced governance and policy makers, to witness the unmasking of a regime that hides behind nationalism and false glory is something that makes me hungry for dissent. It leaves me in a state of euphoria, and I cannot get enough of it. I want to sing out my protest. I want to shout slogans. I want to be a part of this. And I can be a part of this. We all can. We don't need to be in the national capital to voice our protest. We can bring it here – to Meghalaya. Where clouds whisper. Maybe it's time we stop whispering. Let's scream out loud. Let's stir up a storm, and also demand accountability for the state of affairs our state education system is in.

"Last year I visited a remote village in one of the districts in the Khasi Hills and camped there for three nights. There was a lower primary school there – a small two-roomed, one-floor building that catered to a bunch of children from the village. There was one assigned teacher, and since she was not from the same village, she made the journey up and down everyday from her village to the school – or so they would have it be.

Last year I visited a remote village in one of the districts in the Khasi Hills and camped there for three nights: There was a lower primary school there – a small two-roomed, one-floor building that catered to a bunch of children from the village. There was one assigned teacher, and since she was not from the same village, she made the journey up and down everyday from her village to the school – or so they would have it be. Since it was during the monsoon and this particular village was off-road and only accessible by 4x4, the teacher did not attend school throughout our visit. The children still went to school and were tutored by the assigned midday meal cook.

Now in a situation like this, who is accountable?

This year, Meghalaya registered a significant jump on the Union Government's performance grading Index (PGI) in school education. Now what is the PGI? The PGI evaluates school education across all states and Union Territories using a 1,000-point scale across six domains: Learning Outcomes and Quality, Access, Infrastructure & Facilities, Equity, Governance, and Teacher Education & Training. Meghalaya made a 124-point jump from last year and this is apparently impressive. There has been an improvement in all domains especially in governance. The one thing that remained the same though, is the learning outcome & quality – the most important domain. We're still at the bottom.

So if according to data, proper governance is in place, who do we hold accountable for the poor learning outcome and quality? Let me give you a few options.

- The schools
- The teachers
- The parents
- The students
- The private tutors
- Others (if so, who?)

Once upon a time in Shillong, a little child started Kindergarten in a government school and s/he was immediately seen as different and the teachers tried to the best of their outdated capabilities to help her/him learn, but it did not happen. S/he just did not respond to their methods. So it fell onto the parents to teach her/him and the mother accepted that challenge. She studied her/him, how s/he learned, how s/he read and what s/he liked and disliked. She read articles and spoke to others with similar experiences. She slowly integrated a child who learned differently into a teaching and learning system s/he did not understand and one that did not understand her/him in return.

The child somehow just about fits into the system now – like a piece of puzzle forcefully moulded, bent into submission. In this child's experience, there was a promise of a special educator, and it remained a promise – broken and silenced. Her/his parents are well educated so s/he got the help and support needed, but what if the parents did not have the capability or the capacity? What would have happened to that child? Would s/he have dropped out of school by now? Would s/he have been just another statistic whose desire to learn this one-size-fits-all system slowly renders non-existent? Why are our schools not inclusive?

"Once upon a time in Shillong, a little child started Kindergarten in a government school and s/he was immediately seen as different and the teachers tried to the best of their outdated capabilities to help her/him learn, but it did not happen. S/he just did not respond to their methods. So it fell onto the parents to teach her/him and the mother accepted that challenge. She studied her/him, how s/he learned, how s/he read and what s/he liked and disliked."

Who do we hold accountable for instances like these?

What of our high dropout rates? What of our transition and retention rates? What about children in remote villages? Are there schools for them or are they to migrate to the nearest place where schools exist? And even if they did, will there be seats for them there?

So yes, the cockroaches have infected me. With their "audacity" to rise up and demand accountability; with their questions and their lack of faith in our policy makers (because policy is where it matters most – policy and its implementation); but most importantly with their solidarity and their belief that they will change things. And that gives me hope. Because change is exactly what we need.

Letters to the Editor

Wooden Coffins, Copper Savings

Editor,

I wish to congratulate the MeECL on their spectacular performance in Umtangling.

It takes an extraordinary level of apathy to receive repeated warnings about rotting infrastructure and decide that the most cost-effective "repair" is to wait for the wires to fall and use children as grounding rods.

My heart goes out to whoever it is responsible for keeping those wires in the air and in order, it must be exhausting to ignore so many complaints. I hope the "unimaginable tragedy" of two siblings and their friend dying in the mud doesn't disturb their afternoon tea.

I assume the bill for the electricity used to melt those three bodies will be sent to the grieving parents shortly? It would be an absolute shame to let those units go to waste.

Yours etc.,
Ellerine Diengdoh,
Via email

Who Deserves the Blame?

Editor,

Apropos the letter "Meghalaya Deserves Better" by Pdianghun Mawlong (ST July 17, 2026) there is a quiet anger growing in the state, one that does not always appear in newspapers, political speeches or official reports. It resides in the homes of thousands of educated young people who wake up every morning wondering when their opportunity will arrive.

It resides in the minds of graduates who carefully preserve their certificates inside old folders, not because those documents have brought them success, but because they represent years of sacrifice, expectation and hope. It exists among parents who invested everything they could into their children's education, believing that knowledge would become the foundation of a better future. Yet for many families, that promise remains incomplete. The tragedy of Meghalaya is not the absence of talent. The state has never lacked intelligent, hardworking and ambitious young people. Its colleges and universities continue to produce graduates with dreams of becoming teachers, administrators, entrepreneurs, professionals and community leaders. These young people are not asking for special treatment or demanding shortcuts. They ask for something much simpler and more fundamental: a fair opportunity to prove their worth.

But increasingly, many are beginning to question whether merit alone is enough. From childhood, society teaches a powerful lesson: Study hard. Respect your teachers. Work honestly. Develop your skills. One day, your efforts will be rewarded. Parents and teachers repeat this message ad nauseam. Young people believe it because they still believe that the world operates on fairness. However, after years of education and preparation, many discover a painful reality. A degree does not guarantee employment. Ability does not guarantee recognition. Hard work does not overcome systems that people perceive as influenced by connections, favouritism and unequal access to opportunities.

This is where disappointment turns into frustration. Behind every unemployed graduate is a human story that cannot be captured by statistics alone. There is a mother who sacrificed her own needs so her child could study. There is a father who worked extra hours to meet educational expenses. There is a young person who spent years preparing for a career that never materialised. When such individuals remain unemployed despite having knowledge, skills and determination, the damage goes far beyond financial hardship. It affects confidence, dignity and faith in the very institutions that encouraged them to dream. A society cannot continuously tell its youth to believe in merit while allowing them to feel that merit is powerless.

One of the biggest challenges facing Meghalaya today is the growing perception that opportunity is not always distributed fairly. Whether through recruitment processes, appointments or access to public institutions, every controversy that raises questions about transparency creates a deeper sense of insecurity among young people. The issue is not only whether a particular decision was right or wrong. The larger issue is whether citizens believe the system is fair. Trust, once lost, is difficult to rebuild. Public positions are not personal possessions. Government employment, public appointments and opportunities connected to institutions belong to the people. They are responsibilities entrusted by citizens and must therefore be handled with the highest standards of transparency and accountability.

The debate surrounding backdoor entry, nepotism and favouritism in public appointments has become one of the most sensitive issues in Meghalaya. The controversy involving Sanbor Shullai and Ricky Shullai became a subject of public discussion after questions were raised regarding appointments of relatives within the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. Sanbor Shullai defended the appointments and rejected allegations of wrongdoing. Regardless of how individuals view that particular controversy, the wider concern it created cannot simply be dismissed. The deeper question is this: when people see relatives or individuals connected to those in power receiving opportunities linked to public institutions, does the system provide enough transparency to assure ordinary citizens that everyone had an equal chance?

This question matters because public confidence is built not only by following rules but by ensuring that people trust those rules. A talented young person from a middle class or lower middle-class background should not feel that their greatest disadvantage is not their qualification, but their lack of influence. Nepotism creates a dangerous environment where young people begin believing that relationships matter more than ability. When that belief spreads it discourages excellence; weakens motivation and pushes talented individuals to look elsewhere for opportunities. No society can afford to make its youth believe that success depends more on who they know than what they know.

Concerns about transparency have also extended to recruitment practices in various public-sector bodies, including appointments in organisations such as the tainted Meghalaya Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC). Critics have questioned recruitment processes where written examinations are dispensed with and interviews are a mere formality. When clear evaluation criteria, transparency and accountability are lacking, it reveals that personal connections influence outcomes. For unemployed youths who spend years preparing for competitive examinations, the belief that opportunities are decided behind closed doors can be deeply discouraging. Public institutions must therefore ensure that recruitment methods are not only lawful but also transparent enough to convince citizens that merit remains the deciding factor.

Frustration worsens when solutions offered to unemployment do not always translate into real transformation. Skill development has often been presented as an answer to Meghalaya's employment crisis. The idea is simple: provide training, develop practical abilities and connect young people with jobs. Programmes implemented through institutions such as the Meghalaya State Skill Development Society (MSSDS) were created to improve employability and creating pathways towards livelihoods. But the success of skill development cannot be measured only by the number of people trained or the number of certificates issued. A certificate doesn't pay household expenses. A training completion letter cannot replace a stable career. The real question is whether the young person who completes the programme can actually build a secure and dignified future.

Concerns and public discussions surrounding certain skill-placement initiatives have raised questions about whether training opportunities always lead to suitable employment. Some trainees have expressed concerns about placements outside the state and whether the work they received matched their expectations, while MSSDS has stated that verification processes were undertaken and that certain allegations were unsubstantiated. Regardless of the outcome of individual cases, these debates highlight a larger issue: young people and their families need confidence that skill development programmes are not designed only to achieve numbers, but to create meaningful opportunities.

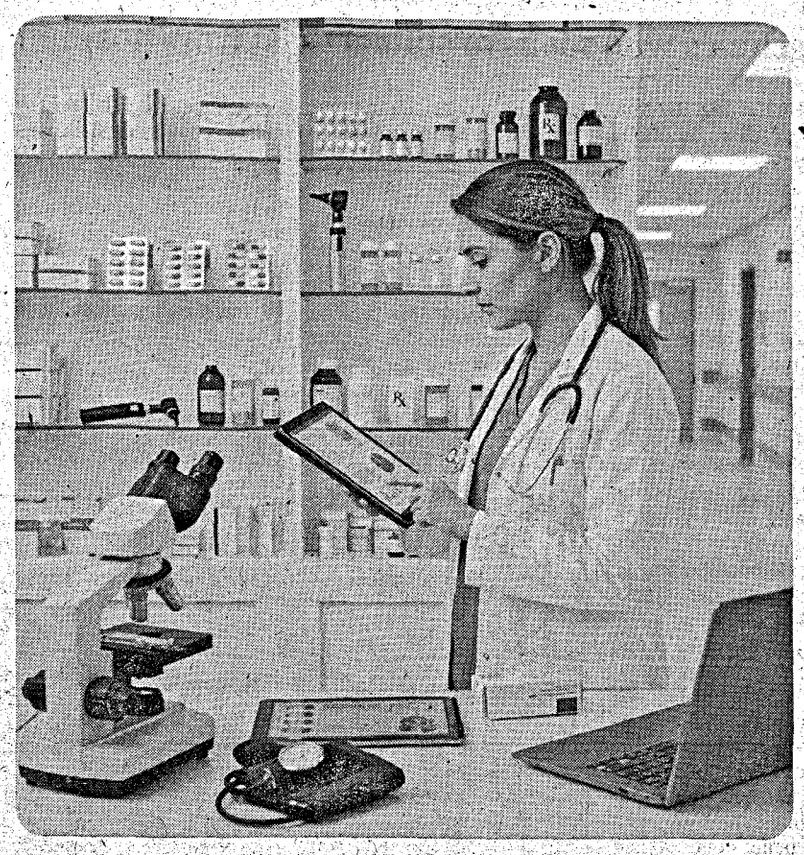
The purpose of training should never be limited to producing certificates but for empowerment. Young people who enrol in a skill programme believe it will change their lives. Many come from families that cannot afford repeated disappointment. If training does not lead to employment, frustration becomes desperation because the promise came from a system that was expected to provide a solution. The state must therefore ask a difficult question: are we creating opportunities, or are we simply creating documents that prove people attended programmes?

Yours etc.,
Sandaburom Syiemlieh
Sohra, Khlieh Shnong

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Bridging Ayurveda and modern medicine for auto-immune care





Autoimmune diseases are rapidly emerging as one of the world's fastest-growing public health concerns, with experts warning that changing lifestyles, environmental exposures, chronic stress and metabolic disturbances are contributing to a steady rise in these complex disorders across all age groups. Against this backdrop, leading specialists from Ayurveda and modern medicine are calling for deeper scientific collaboration to improve understanding, prevention and long-term management of autoimmune diseases through evidence-based, patient-centred approaches.

Medical experts note that autoimmune disorders develop when the body's immune system, instead of protecting against harmful pathogens, mistakenly attacks healthy cells and tissues. The resulting chronic inflammation can affect multiple organs and systems, often requiring lifelong treatment and significantly reducing quality of life. As the global burden of these conditions continues to grow, researchers believe that no single medical discipline holds all the answers, making interdisciplinary dialogue increasingly important.

While modern medicine has made remarkable progress in identifying the molecular and cellular mechanisms responsible for autoimmune diseases, experts point out that most available therapies are designed primarily to suppress abnormal immune activity and control symptoms. Although these treatments have transformed patient care and improved outcomes for many individuals, they often require prolonged medication and careful monitoring. Ayurveda, on the other hand, approaches the problem from a different perspective by seeking to restore the body's natural balance, improve resilience and strengthen its intrinsic disease-resisting capacity through personalised interventions involving diet, lifestyle, metabolism and rejuvenation therapies.

These themes will take centre stage at Kshamatvam 2026, the 6th International Conference on Translational Ayurveda in Autoimmune Disorders, scheduled to be held at the Sri Dharmasthala Manjunatheshwara College of Ayurveda, Hospital and Research Centre (SDMCAH & RC), Udupi, from September 30 to October 1. A pre-conference workshop focusing on practical and research-oriented aspects of autoimmune disorders will be organised on September 29.

The conference aims to bring together experts from Ayurveda, immunology, biomedical sciences and integrative medicine to examine evidence-based strategies for autoimmune diseases and foster meaningful collaboration between traditional knowledge systems and contemporary medical research. Organisers say the event is intended not only to facilitate scientific discussions but also to encourage new partnerships that could lead to innovative approaches for patient care.

"Autoimmune diseases occur when the body's own defence system loses its ability to distinguish between self and non-self. Instead of protecting the body, it begins attacking healthy tissues, making these conditions difficult to treat," said Dr Prasanna N Rao, Director, SDM Ayurveda Institutions, SDM Education Society, Ujire, Karnataka.

He explained that Ayurveda interprets immunity through classical concepts such as Vyadhikshamatva, Bala and Ojas, which collectively emphasise preserving and strengthening the body's inherent resilience rather than focusing solely on disease suppression. According to him, these concepts provide a broader framework for understanding health and immunity that complements ongoing advances in biomedical science. "The idea is not simply to suppress immunity but to understand why this imbalance develops and help restore equilibrium through personalised approaches involving diet, lifestyle, metabolism and rejuvenation therapies," Rao said.

Professor Prasanna N Mogasale, Department of Roga Nidana, SDM College of Ayurveda, Udupi, and organising secretary of the conference, said autoimmune diseases, once regarded as relatively uncommon, are now being diagnosed with increasing frequency among children, adults and older people alike. The trend, he said, reflects broader changes in modern living and highlights the need for more comprehensive research into the underlying causes of immune dysfunction.

He identified irregular sleep patterns, persistent psychological stress, sedentary lifestyles, processed foods, environmental pollution and disruption of natural biological rhythms among the factors believed to be contributing to the growing burden of autoimmune diseases worldwide. While research continues to investigate the precise interactions between genetics, environment and immunity, these lifestyle-related factors are receiving increasing attention from scientists and clinicians.

"Many patients require lifelong medication that controls symptoms but does not necessarily correct the underlying immune imbalance. This is where meaningful dialogue between Ayurveda and modern immunology becomes important," Mogasale added, stressing that collaboration between the two systems should be guided by scientific evidence and rigorous clinical research.

Associate Professor Arhanth Kumar A, another organising secretary of the conference, said the event has been designed as a scientific platform where classical Ayurvedic principles can be examined alongside contemporary biomedical research using accepted standards of evidence generation. "The conference will feature keynote lectures, scientific sessions, paper and poster presentations, panel discussions and hands-on workshops covering research models, Panchakarma procedures, Marma Chikitsa and drug surveys related to autoimmune disorders," he said.

He added that researchers and clinicians from different disciplines would have opportunities to exchange ideas, evaluate emerging evidence and identify areas where collaborative research could help improve diagnosis, treatment and long-term patient outcomes.

"The objective is to encourage evidence generation and interdisciplinary collaboration so that traditional knowledge and modern science together can contribute to better patient care," he added.

Dr Mamatha KV, Principal of SDM College of Ayurveda, Udupi, said the conference would also serve as an important academic platform for researchers, clinicians, postgraduate scholars and students to present original scientific work, discuss emerging findings and exchange ideas on translational research related to autoimmune diseases. She noted that encouraging young researchers to engage with interdisciplinary science would be essential for building stronger evidence in the years ahead.

Dr Nagaraj S Academic Vice Principal of SDM College of Ayurveda, Udupi, observed that Ayurveda's longstanding principle of preserving the health of healthy individuals while restoring the health of those affected by disease remains particularly relevant at a time when autoimmune disorders are becoming increasingly common across the world. *(Agencies)*

WHEN THE BODY TURNS INWARD

An autoimmune disease is a condition in which the body's immune system mistakenly identifies its own healthy cells, tissues, and organs as foreign invaders.

Instead of protecting the body from external threats like bacteria or viruses, the immune system produces antibodies that attack its own host. This internal misfire can cause chronic inflammation, tissue damage, and a wide range of debilitating symptoms, manifesting in well-known conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, type 1 diabetes, and multiple sclerosis.

In short, it is a case of biological friendly fire, where the body's natural defence system becomes its own worst enemy.

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi — **Sunday, JULY 19, 2026**

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon semi-square Jupiter on your solar return chart and it will give fantastic results. You will get peace and happiness. You will also get full support from your life partner. An influential person will provide you with timely help and take you forward in your life. The decisions regarding court cases that are pending will be in your favour. Works will get completed. Before making any investment in land, vehicles etc. take proper advice. You will try and obtain all the amenities in life. You will get lot of time to spend with your companion. You will get a chance to get connected to new people. You will also get a chance to fulfil your interests. You will also enjoy the holidays fully. You can get a responsible position in your job. Money will be spent on comforts and facilities. You will be able to overcome obstacles with your good understanding.

'This week for you'



Aries : (March 21 - April 20) It is going to be a happy week for you. You will get opportunities to rise in your life. Your boss and senior officers will be happy with your work. Someone in the family will earn lot of wealth for you. You will also get good responses in your business. Your colleagues will be impressed by your work and capabilities. You will also manage to keep your partner happy. Lovemates will enjoy wonderful bonding and will get closer to each other. You will also enjoy marital bliss. You need to remain alert and not show any carelessness in any matter. Also keep an eye on your associates. You also cannot afford to take your health for granted and must keep doing exercises and yoga to keep yourself fit.



Taurus : (April 21 - May 21) A wonderful week awaits you ahead. You will be enjoying a favorable phase in your life. You will never be short of funds and money will keep coming. Your enemies will also not be able to stand before you. You will also bring a good name for your family. You will remain busy and will not be able to give time to your family. Your partner will not be happy with it. You need to balance things and need to look at your family affairs too. There can be discussions or arguments in your family. But you will avoid it. A family function will also take place. You will be pleased and happy in the company of your friends.



Gemini : (May 22 - June 21) This is the period which will bring lot of relief for you from the troubles that have been haunting you for some time. Your financial status and work conditions will improve. There will be rise in your fortunes. Your business will bring lot of gains and profits. You will also spend quality time with your spouse/partner. You will also get success in love matters. The relations with your brother and family will be better. You will remain in good mood. You will also participate in a family function. You will also receive good news from somewhere.



Cancer : (June 22 - July 22) Some of your decisions may go wrong. But you need not worry much. Just stay away from arguments and fights. You will make progress in your job. Honesty, dedication, passion for work and truthfulness will be your plus point. You will walk on the path of success due to your intelligence and patience. But avoid being straight forward. Your bosses will listen to your views and encourage you. Even your colleagues will cooperate with you. You will have financial gains in your work/business. Don't put your money into risky ventures. There will be good understanding between husband and wives. Do not lose your patience and discipline in certain matters. Those who are in politics/media will do well. You will also go on a fun trip with your family.



Leo : (July 23 - August 23) Your official matters will be solved with ease. Suddenly your name and fame will rise. You will become very popular amongst your colleagues. Those who are in business in partnership or association will get gains and profits. Your financial status will be stable. Your enemies and opponents will be active but unable to harm you. You will get lot of success in matters like job, business and investments. You will be full of energy and excitement. You will enjoy wonderful bonding with your mate. The husband and wife will understand the needs, feelings and aspirations of each other well. You will also meet an inspirational or influential person. He/she will help you to improve your work. You can fall in love with someone special. You will be successful in your love relations. Your decisions will prove to be correct.



Virgo : (August 24 - September 22) You will plan to buy a new vehicle or property. You will also purchase costly items for household needs. You will also get involved in new romantic relations with a person working in your office. You may have also known this person before. It will be a very warm and fulfilling affair leading to marriage. You will also have financial gains. Money and wealth will keep coming. A person whom you trust may betray you. Even with your intelligence and cleverness, your results will be messed up. You will just remain alert and cautious. Your bosses and elders will shower their blessings on you. You will remain popular. You will have a more disciplined perspective than before in your business/work. Asset related disputes will be solved in the presence of someone.



Libra : (September 23 - October 23) It will be a very fruitful week. You will have lot of gains. You will also put extra effort into your new task. It will bring rich dividends. You will put your best efforts to complete your work. A business problem will get sorted out with ease. You will win trust and confidence of your colleagues, associates and bosses. You will come closer to your spouse/partner and will share emotional bonding with him/her. You will also have lot of love for your family members. Your brothers/sisters will give you lot of respect. Students will get positive results. Being close to experienced people will prove to be extremely helpful and beneficial. Your love life will be fantastic. You will remain positive and in high spirits.



Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22) All good things will happen to you this week. The star of your destiny will once again shine and your struck tasks will gather momentum. Income will rise. You will have gains from investments you made in the past. New job/business offers too will come. You will get success in love and romance. You will also get blessings of your elders. Your faith in God will help you in overcoming all problems. Your wife/husband will prove to be a source of strength. New contacts will be made in your business or job. You will not waste your time on useless things. You will implement new strategy and because of which you will meet an influential person. And get success too.



Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21) Maybe you will feel nostalgic this week. You will remember your good old days and friends. You will come closer to your family, and your sweet tone will impress one and all. Your colleagues will also seek inspiration from you. You will remain favorite of your bosses. Your financial condition will remain stable. You will also share warm relations with your spouse/partner. Those seeking a new partner will get marriage proposal. Peaceful atmosphere will be formed in your house and workplace. You will get success in exams. Your court-related cases will be solved with ease. Troubles of your friends and acquaintances will get finished now. You will also meet people with the same understanding. You will remain in perfect health.



Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20) This is a success granting week from all angles. You will make progress in your job/business. Even your romantic life is going to be amazing. You will share wonderful bonds with your partner. You will get success in love matters. YYour work planning will take you towards success. The week will fetch you great rewards. There will be an increase in your work potential. There is scope for promotion in your job. You will also go for some investments and savings etc. You will also have a loving behavior towards your family members. They will also love and support you a lot. You will feel satisfied overall. You will get good rewards for your efforts.

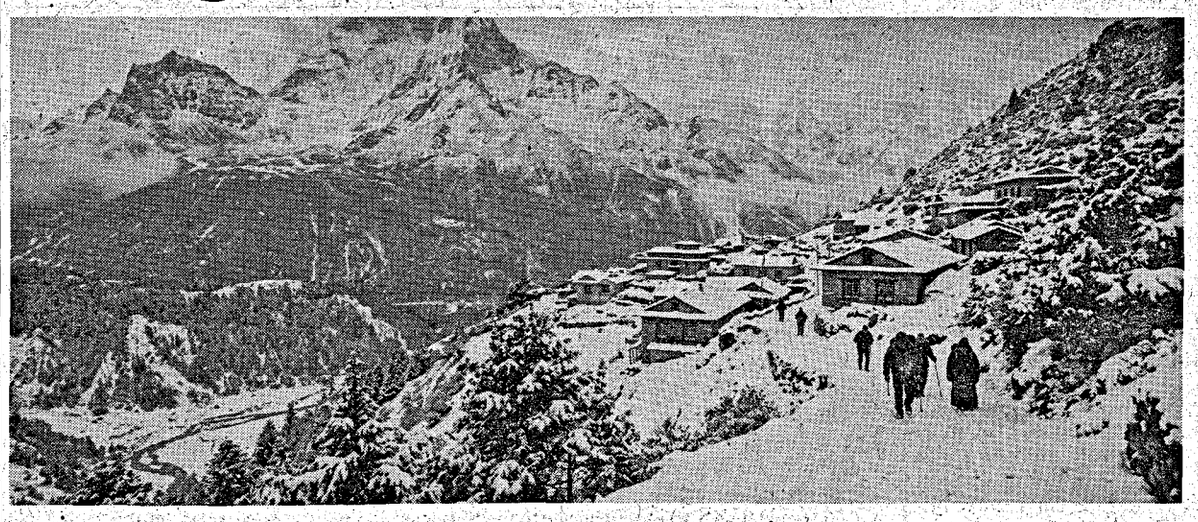


Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18) This is a favorable time for you. You will move ahead on the path to success. You will also have financial gains. Your growth in business is going to be good. You will put your best efforts to realizing your dreams and you will get positive results for them. Good news will come from somewhere. Time will be peaceful. You will also travel with your family to a travel destination for fun and relaxation. You will plan well before doing any work. You will get success in property deals. Time will be spent wonderfully. There will be too much fun and merriment. Do not lend money to anyone. You will be successful in finding a solution to several problems with your intelligence and wisdom.



Pisces : (February 19 - March 20) All your planned work will be completed. Government related work will take place. You will be busy with your official/business affairs. There will be some obstacles created by your enemies in your tasks, but they will not be successful. Your loved one will support you a lot. You will share nice relations with your spouse/partner. Your health will be perfect. Your efforts will fetch you great rewards. There will be an increase in your work potential. You will get promoted. There is scope for growth in your business. You will go for some investment and saving etc. You will carry out your duties perfectly. You will be ready to accept any kind of challenge. You will be busy with your work. You will also move forward with lot of self-confidence.

Himalayan snowfall may be far greater than estimated



The Himalayas may be receiving significantly more snowfall than previously estimated, according to a new study that could reshape scientific understanding of one of Asia's most important freshwater sources. Researchers have found that widely used snowfall analyses underestimated seasonal snowfall by as much as 37 per cent over the Lake Hampta region in Himachal Pradesh during a single winter, highlighting major gaps in existing measurement methods.

The findings, published in the Monthly Weather Review, suggest that snowfall across the west-central Himalayas has been miscalculated for years. The international research team, comprising scientists from the British Antarctic Survey, the UK Met Office and the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kharagpur, has introduced an innovative technique that promises more accurate estimates of snowfall in some of the world's most challenging mountain landscapes.

Accurately measuring snowfall in the Himalayas has long been a scientific challenge. Rugged terrain, harsh weather conditions and limited monitoring infrastructure make it difficult for conventional instruments to capture the true amount of snow that falls across high-altitude regions. Yet snowfall is a critical component of the Earth's water cycle and serves as a vital source of freshwater for millions of people downstream.

To overcome these limitations, the researchers turned to an unlikely ally—high-altitude frozen lakes. Rather than relying solely on traditional weather instruments, the team used commercially available water-pressure sensors installed beneath the surfaces of three lakes: Ghepan and Hampta in the western Himalayas of Himachal Pradesh, and Mugu Lake in Nepal.

According to lead author Siddharth Gumber, a mountain climate scientist with the British Antarctic Survey, the lakes themselves function as vast natural pressure sensors. Unlike conventional instruments that record snowfall at a single point, the lake-based system effectively measures snowfall across the entire frozen surface, which can span thousands to billions of square metres. This allows scientists to capture both the timing and intensity of snowfall with far greater accuracy.

The technology is based on Archimedes' principle of displacement. As snow accumulates on the frozen lake surface, it increases the pressure exerted on the water beneath the ice. The submerged sensors detect these pressure changes, enabling researchers to directly calculate the mass of accumulating snow. Because the method measures snow mass rather than relying on indirect estimates, it provides a more accurate and unbiased assessment of snowfall.

The study found that the improved model not only reproduced the timing of snowfall events with remarkable accuracy but also closely matched the amount of snow that accumulated throughout the season. It performed particularly well during extreme snowfall events, which are often the most difficult for existing models to represent accurately.

"The results show that the model can accurately simulate both the timing and amounts of the snowfall observations and can effectively be used for the generation of long-term snowfall products," the researchers wrote.

The implications extend far beyond scientific research. Knowing precisely when and how much snow falls is essential for predicting the timing of snowmelt, estimating river flows and assessing future water availability. These insights could help governments, water managers and local communities prepare more effectively for seasonal water shortages and changing climate conditions.

Gumber noted that mountain water supplies are becoming increasingly uncertain as parts of the Himalayan region begin experiencing more frequent water stress. Despite the mountains serving as the source of many major rivers across South Asia, significant uncertainties remain about exactly how much water they provide and how those supplies may change in a warming climate.

"Good measurements of snowfall are now more important than ever for predicting the future of water resources, which until now have been lacking," Gumber said.

The study underscores the growing need for more reliable observations in mountain environments. As climate change alters snowfall patterns and accelerates glacier retreat, improved monitoring techniques such as lake-based pressure sensing could play a crucial role in strengthening weather forecasting, water-resource planning and long-term climate research across the Himalayan region. *(Agencies)*

"Setting goals is the first step in turning the invisible into the visible."

—Tony Robbins

The Shillong Times

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Break your silence

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi had earned the reputation of being an effective communicator by virtue of his 'bhashans' from the podium, which claimed to attract millions. Over the years, he however also earned disrepute over his failure to speak up on matters of significance to the nation and instead indulging in speeches that have no connection with the present. His Mann Ki Baat radio programme itself is hardly engaging the informed sections. He rambles on and on about mundane topics that evince no serious public interest, while not speaking on contemporary subjects of national interest. His silence on important matters is deafening, as in the present case of the Ram Temple loot in Ayodhya. Shortly before the start of the Monsoon Session of Parliament, Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi and Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge jointly addressed a letter to the PM, asking him to break the silence on the Ayodhya loot. As they have pointed out, it was the Modi government that formed the Ram Temple Trust, which eventually presided over this epic loot of "thousands of crores" from the temple.

The Ram Temple is no ordinary temple. It was erected with land given by the government and funds organised from Hindus all over the world. Even its bricks were collected from Hindu faithful, home to home. Every Hindu family in the Hindi-belt states and beyond contributed majorly for its erection. Devotees lined up by their millions to offer prayers and put their hard-earned money into the temple hundis, much of which has now been spirited away by the self-appointed guardians of faith. The resignation of the temple trust secretary, a close associate of the Prime Minister himself, at the very outset of the loot's exposure in the media, showed his hands are not clean. He was either involved in the misappropriation or remained as a silent spectator, which though was unlikely. The Prime Minister took it upon himself to oversee the temple's affairs by entrusting his trusted people, including mostly VHP-RSS functionaries, to stand in the forefront. Their collective greed took things to such a pass – and the prime minister is silent as a stone. He flies in and flies out of the controversies, with the same ease with which he landed in Ayodhya to oversee the consecration rituals.

There is no clarity yet as to how much funds from the temple chests have been siphoned off. Lord Ram himself was looted. This raises big questions on its linkages with politics. India as a secular nation had distanced its politics from religion until the BJP entered the scene with a bang in the 1980s and won power at the Centre and states by raising the bogey of Hindutva and cornering the minority Muslims in the name of the Ram Janambhoomi. The VHP, RSS and BJP leaders jointly oversaw the demolition of the dilapidated, uncared for Babri Masjid if only to raise Hindu frenzy and convert it into votes. While they succeeded in this, it is incumbent on them and more importantly the Prime Minister to break their silence over this epic loot, at least in the People's Parliament.

The CM's Silence on Nongkhlieh Speaks Volumes

By H H Mohrmen

While we appreciate the government's stand on uranium mining in the state, we wonder why the Chief Minister is silent on the issue of setting up a cement plant in the Nongkhlieh area. The importance of the Shnongrim Ridge in the cave history of the state has been well documented and widely highlighted. The government therefore cannot feign ignorance about the significant findings in the network of caves along the Shnongrim Ridge.

Caves That Have Become History

Limestone mining, especially where cement plants are involved, is a quick way to destroy a forest and the cave system beneath it. Take the example of Krem Kotsati Umlawan in Lumshnong village, measuring 21,530 metres. After cement plants were allowed to operate in the Narpuh area, it is no longer safe to even enter the cave. With rampant limestone mining in the area, which also relies on explosives, the cave has effectively been destroyed. It may not be wrong to say that Krem Kotsati Umlawan is now becoming part of history.

Another cave that has been affected by the now-decommissioned Cherra Cement Company is the Mawkhyrdop/Mawmluh Cave; where some of its tunnels have been blasted open (Tringham, 2012). The cave is located near Cherrapunji itself. In just a few decades, since cement plants started operating in the state, we have already lost some of our most valuable caves.

Nongkhlieh Is Going the Narpuh Way

I was in the Nongkhlieh area a few months back, and when I visited a nearby village, I was shocked to learn that the Dorbar Chnong of Tongseng Nongkhlieh village has also issued a No Objection Certificate for another cement company to set up shop in the area. There is already an existing Jaiñtia Cement Ltd. located at Latyrke, a village on the way to Nongkhlieh Eleka and the Saipung area. The question is: what will happen if the government allows these two more plants to start operating at Nongkhlieh?

Does the Chief Minister realize that permitting one cement plant to operate in the area is like opening Pandora's Box, one that will lead to another, and another, and ultimately destroy the entire region?

Narpuh, Nongtalang, and Now Nongkhlieh

Nongtalang and Shella extracted limestone for export to Bangladesh, and the people of Nongtalang do not seem to have benefited economically from the trade. The extraction came at the cost of the environment and may also be a cause of the diminishing rainfall in the Jaiñtia Hills. The reason is that the Nongtalang Amlarem Syndai range was the first major obstruction to the rain-laden monsoon winds arriving from the Bay of Bengal before they proceeded to the Jaiñtia Plateau. Now that limestone mining has stripped away the hills in Nongtalang, it has almost certainly affected rainfall patterns across the Jaiñtia Hills.

The Narpuh area already has ten cement plants, and there is Jaiñtia Cement under Eleka Sutnga. How many more cement plants does the government need? The most pertinent question is this: despite East Jaiñtia Hills having eleven cement plants, the district's economy is still not improving as expected. One would have thought that cement projects would help support the economy of this mineral-rich district, especially after the coal mining ban of 2014. The question is: do cement plants actually help improve the local economy? The answer is clearly "No."

Lafarge Abandoned Its Nongkhlieh Plan

In 2010, Lafarge planned to establish a mega cement plant at Shnongrim capable of producing one million metric tonnes of cement a year. Along with local people, we protested against the plan, and the company abandoned the idea. At one point, an executive from the company even called me, trying to arrange a meeting, to which I politely excused myself because I did not think it was right for us to meet. I also recall receiving an email from a person in France. I responded to all the queries in the email but did nothing beyond that. We were, however, left bewildered because we did not know why Lafarge had so suddenly and easily decided to abandon its mission.

It was only when I read the book published by Thomas Arbenz for the Abode of Clouds Project in 2012 that it dawned on me why the company had called off the mission. Dr. Mark E. Tringham, PhD, FGS, UK Chartered Geologist, explained why the company backed out. Writing in Cave Pearls of Meghalaya (A Cave Inventory Covering the Jaiñtia Hills, Meghalaya, India, Volume 1: Pala Range and Kopili Valley), Dr. Tringham described how a Lafarge delegation visited the Caving in the Abode of Clouds Expedition on Shnongrim Ridge. After learning that the area held some of India's most spectacular caves, including Krem Liat Prah, India's longest cave, the company chose to abandon its large-scale cement project, even though some of the land had already been purchased (Tringham, 2012).

The question the government needs to ask itself is this: what makes Nongkhlieh so special that even a multinational company decided to step back and leave nature alone? Can we expect the NPP-led government to at least try to understand why Lafarge thought that protecting the area was more important than the profit it could earn from the project? On the contrary, why is the NPP so determined to let a cement plant set up shop there?

What Lafarge Understood

The incident taught me one of the most valuable lessons of my life: that a multinational company, at least in this case, still respected the sentiments of the local people and demonstrated a sense of ethics in how it conducted its business. Credit should be given where credit is due. In this instance, the company allowed its moral compass to guide its decision. Unlike some Indian cement companies, whose only objective seems to be profiteering, with little regard for either the environment or the people who call these hills home.

I used to share the Nongkhlieh story of 2010 every now and then as an example of how a community can decide its own fate. But now I have to add another chapter to that story: the story of a company that considered nature important enough to abandon its mission despite spending money lobbying the government, engaging the public and even purchasing land. It was an instance where a company believed that leaving nature untouched was far more valuable than the profit it could generate from operating a business. It is perhaps the first time that we have witnessed a company declaring that green is not only the colour of money, but also the colour of nature. Now, what does this story tell us about our government?

The Legacy the NPP Will Leave Behind

The Congress Party was blamed for the mushrooming of cement plants in the Narpuh area because it was during its rule, both in the state and at the Jaiñtia Hills Autonomous District Council, that these companies received permission to operate through a single-window policy. The condition of the villages where the cement plants are located is for everyone to see: locals have lost ownership of their land, and their environment is polluted.

Is history about to repeat itself now that the NPP leads both the state government and the JHADC by opening the same Pandora's Box for Nongkhlieh? On the other hand, the question also arises: why is there no interest in starting a cement plant in the Garo Hills despite the region having large limestone reserves?

When CM's Silence Is Deafening

Past experience tells us that whenever the Chief Minister stays silent, companies win the tussle. Time and again, public opinion has been ignored in favour of corporate interests. On 20 March 2019, despite public protests against the public hearing conducted by the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board and the Deputy Commissioner of East Jaiñtia Hills for the expansion of Star Cement's limestone mining, the project was given the green light. Again, on 24 August 2023, despite protests against the public hearing held at Thangskai village to discuss the expansion of M/s Meghalaya Cement Ltd. (Topcem) from 2,600 tonnes per day (TPD) to 4,500 TPD, permission was granted.

Now, despite widespread opposition to the proposed cement plant in Nongkhlieh Eleka, Conrad Sangma's response has been a deafening silence. Does Conrad K. Sangma want to be remembered as the Chief Minister under whose watch the cave system of Nongkhlieh was destroyed? Is he really prepared to let India's longest cave be sacrificed?

The answer lies with the Chief Minister himself because, under the single-window policy, the buck stops at his table. Will he take a leaf out of Lafarge's book and declare Nongkhlieh a protected area once and for all, or will he open the floodgates and allow Nongkhlieh to suffer the same fate as Narpuh?

Appalling condition of State Highways

By HT Wells

Meghalaya has witnessed encouraging efforts in recent years to improve road connectivity through new highway projects and increased central assistance. These initiatives deserve recognition. However, they cannot conceal an uncomfortable reality: more than 54 years after attaining statehood, many of the state's principal highways and inter-district lifeline roads remain in an appalling condition. Among the most glaring examples is the Nongstoin–Rongjeng–Tura corridor, one of Meghalaya's most important east-west road links.

A particularly distressing stretch is the approximately 42-kilometre section between Rongjeng and Williamnagar Junction, where widening and improvement works are currently underway. The decision to upgrade this strategic corridor into a four-lane highway is both welcome and long overdue. Yet the painfully slow pace of execution has transformed what should have been a symbol of progress into a daily ordeal for thousands of commuters.

Roads in Meghalaya are far more than a means of transportation—they are the state's lifeline. Unlike many other states that enjoy the advantages of railways, inland waterways or extensive air connectivity, Meghalaya depends almost entirely on its road network for the movement of people, goods and essential services. This reality places an enormous responsibility on successive governments to ensure that highways linking districts are built, upgraded and maintained according to modern engineering and safety standards.

Unfortunately, the situation on the ground falls well short of that expectation. The Rongjeng–Williamnagar stretch has become an exhausting obstacle course. A journey that should ordinarily take little more than an hour now frequently extends to nearly two hours. Motorists are forced to negotiate crater-sized potholes, unfinished embankments, temporary diversions, bridge construction sites, loose earth and hazardous work zones. During the monsoon, these sections deteriorate further into muddy tracks where water-filled craters conceal damaged road surfaces, making travel even more perilous.

Every journey exacts a heavy price through wasted time, excessive fuel consumption, accelerated wear and tear on vehicles, and avoidable physical strain. Many commuters, myself included, have become poorer with every trip, forced to spend nearly twice as much on fuel simply to navigate this difficult stretch. What should be a routine journey has become an unnecessary financial burden imposed on ordinary citizens. Development should never come at the cost of inflicting such avoidable hardship on the very people it is intended to serve.

Equally alarming is the condition of the 102-kilometre National Highway connecting Nongstoin and Rongjeng. A road bearing the designation of a National Highway should reflect national standards of safety, engineering and capacity. Unfortunately, much of this corridor bears little resemblance to those expectations. Large sections remain barely six metres wide, weaving through an endless succession of sharp bends and blind curves that severely compromise visibility and road safety. Travelling along this winding route is not for the faint-hearted, particularly for passengers who experience motion sickness.

The recurring reports of accidents and near misses along these dangerous curves are deeply concerning. They highlight the urgent need for proper geometric improvements rather than mere periodic resurfacing. The consequences are especially severe for ambulances transporting critically ill patients, school buses, commercial vehicles and elderly passengers who rely on this highway every day.

One is compelled to ask whether the Detailed Project Report (DPR) for this corridor adequately incorporated modern highway engineering principles, realistic traffic projections and internationally accepted road safety standards. To any regular traveller, it appears that much of the existing hill alignment has simply been retained with minimal geometric correction, leaving numerous hazardous curves virtually untouched by merely following the existing cattle-track alignment. If this assessment is accurate, the project deserves a comprehensive technical review. Infrastructure intended to serve future generations cannot be compromised by outdated planning or inadequate engineering foresight.

The success of infrastructure development cannot be measured by foundation stones, project announcements or ceremonial inaugurations. It must instead be judged by timely execution, engineering quality and the tangible improvements experienced by ordinary citizens. Every delay in completing strategically important highways inflates construction costs, disrupts commerce, discourages tourism and slows the economic integration of Meghalaya's interior districts.

Ironically, many travellers today prefer driving through Assam despite covering a longer distance, simply because the roads there often provide a smoother, safer and more predictable journey. It is unfortunate that citizens are compelled to leave their own state in search of better infrastructure merely to reach destinations within Meghalaya. Such a situation should concern every policymaker.

The Government of Meghalaya must therefore work vigorously with the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways to pursue the comprehensive widening, realignment and modernisation of the Nongstoin–Rongjeng corridor. Merely resurfacing an outdated alignment will not meet the transportation needs of the coming decades. Modern highways require scientifically designed horizontal and vertical alignments, wider carriageways, efficient drainage systems, slope stabilisation measures, crash barriers, safe overtaking zones and internationally accepted road furniture. Traffic studies should also be rigorously evaluated through Commercial Vehicles Per Day (CVD) and Passenger Car Unit (PCU) analyses before determining pavement strength, carriageway width and sight-distance requirements.

Infrastructure remains the foundation of economic progress. Good roads promote tourism, facilitate trade, reduce transportation costs, improve access to healthcare and education, attract investment and strengthen social integration. In Meghalaya, where railway connectivity remains virtually absent and air services benefit only a limited section of the population, roads are not a luxury they are the very arteries of development.

Compounding the hardship faced by commuters is the lack of routine roadside vegetation clearance. Overgrown roadside vegetation has drastically reduced sight distances, creating serious safety hazards, particularly on sharp bends and during the monsoon.

After more than five decades of statehood, Meghalaya deserves highways comparable to those found in India's better-performing states. Citizens should not have to brace themselves for dangerous journeys every time the rains arrive. While the state has made encouraging progress in initiating new connectivity projects, equal urgency must now be directed towards restoring, upgrading and modernising the old highways that continue to serve as the backbone of everyday life.

The time has come for governments to recognise that infrastructure is judged not by announcements but by outcomes. Every day of delay imposes an invisible tax on thousands of commuters through lost time, higher transport costs and compromised safety. The people of Meghalaya deserve roads that connect opportunities—not highways that test endurance.

Letters to the Editor

A Vehicle Can Protect Without Intimidating

Editor,

I wish to respectfully draw the attention of the Government of Meghalaya and the Home Department to the psychological and environmental implications of our State's police fleet.

My concern pertains specifically to the boxy, black Mahindra Thar presently in use by our police force. While it is undoubtedly robust and capable, its design conveys a heavy, assertive character. To many citizens, it appears less an instrument of public safety and more reminiscent of vehicles associated with intimidation in popular media.

On Shillong's congested streets and on our State's narrow, winding roads, this vehicle projects an antagonising presence. Rather than instilling reassurance, it often creates tensions, making people feel apprehensive instead of protected. An aggressive vehicle elevates stress and blood pressure.

Metaphorically and environmentally, when collective human temperatures rise, so does the Earth's temperature. A police vehicle ought to safeguard without alarming. Strength need not appear hostile.

I therefore earnestly request the Government of Meghalaya to consider transitioning to calmer, more approachable, and environmentally sustainable alternatives for our police department – such as electric vehicles. This would serve a two- fold purpose: easing public anxiety on our roads and reducing the carbon footprint of law enforcement.

Let us choose mobility that brings tranquility to our streets and healing to our planet.

Yours etc.,
Morning Star Sumer,
Via email

Who Stole Our Future?

Editor,

Apropos the article "The Price of Neglect" by Darisuk Syiemlieh published in The Shillong Times on July 14, 2026, the issues raised deserve attention because they reflect a crisis that extends beyond unemployment or delayed recruitment. The deeper concern is the growing sense among many young people that the promises made to them through education, hard work and honesty are no longer matched by opportunity.

Across Meghalaya, countless families have invested years of sacrifice believing that education would secure a better future. Yet many educated young men and women continue to wait—for employment, for fair opportunity and, above all, for the assurance that merit still matters. The greatest danger is not simply the absence of jobs, but the gradual loss of faith in institutions meant to reward ability and integrity. When effort no longer appears to guarantee a fair chance, disappointment slowly gives way to disillusionment.

Meghalaya has never lacked talent. Its young people have consistently demonstrated the ability to excel both within and beyond the state. The tragedy is not a shortage of capable minds but the inability to create conditions where those minds can flourish at home. Every young person compelled to leave in search of opportunity represents not only a personal loss but a reminder that the state's greatest resource is quietly slipping away.

Equally important is the question of public trust. Citizens can endure hardship when they believe the system is fair. But whenever recruitment processes, appointments or public institutions become subjects of persistent controversy, confidence begins to erode. Transparency and accountability are not administrative formalities; they are the foundations upon which democratic legitimacy rests.

This is why leadership matters. Meghalaya has known leaders whose legacy was defined not by power or privilege but by character. B. B. Lyngdoh remains respected not merely because of the offices he held, but because of the values he embodied—simplicity, intellectual curiosity and an unwavering sense of public duty. His life reflected an understanding that public office is a responsibility entrusted by the people, not an opportunity for personal advancement. Such examples remind us that constitutional authority may come through office, but moral authority can only be earned through public confidence.

Ultimately, history will not remember governments for the promises they announced or the speeches they delivered. It will remember whether they restored hope to a generation that waited patiently for its chance, strengthened institutions so that merit prevailed over influence, and gave young people reason to believe that their future could be built in their own homeland.

For the true wealth of Meghalaya does not lie beneath its hills or within its natural resources. It lies in the minds, integrity and aspirations of its youth. If that faith is allowed to fade, no measure of economic progress will compensate for what has been lost. When future generations look back at this moment, will they say this was the time Meghalaya renewed its faith in its youth—or the moment it quietly allowed its future to walk away?

Yours etc.,
Delphine L. Kurkalang,
(A young unemployed graduate)
Nongpoh

Time for Inclusivity, not Over-protectionism

Editor,

Every community is unique and their culture and social practices are invaluable regardless of population size. A numerically strong and a smaller community both deserve equal respect for their culture and traditions. However, numerical strength alone cannot justify extraordinary constitutional or legal safeguards for any community, as is often argued in Meghalaya. Here, Goa offers a unique counter argument.

Goa with a population of only 15 Lakhs (2011 Census), significantly less than Meghalaya, welcomed "influx" of 1.02 crore "outsiders" (domestic tourists) in 2025. Interestingly, Goa does not have any special protection like the Sixth Schedule, ILP, land Transfer Act or any restrictions on trade/business by "outsiders." Despite the massive "influx" of outsiders and the absence of any special constitutional or legal protections, the people of Goa neither live in perpetual fear of losing their culture or land, nor have they been outnumbered or deprived of their distinct identity. In contrast, in Meghalaya, despite extensive legal safeguards, there are persistent demands for more protection. This indicates that the push for additional safeguards is not rooted in numerical strength or cultural survival, but rather reflects conscious social attitudes of exclusion aimed at keeping permanent non-tribal residents outside the social, administrative, political, and economic spheres and extending the same even to Indian tourists. Goa unequivocally demonstrates that small population size does not automatically necessitate restrictive constitutional or legal protections.

Therefore, considering the existing safeguards in Meghalaya and their proven effectiveness over time, there is no justification or necessity for the Government of India or the Government of Meghalaya to entertain further demands for additional protection for tribal communities. On the contrary, drawing from the example of Goa, the Government of Meghalaya should seriously consider easing certain restrictions for the permanent non-tribal population in the spheres of employment and trade, and shelve any measures aimed at monitoring domestic tourists. Such an approach would foster inclusivity and contribute to the all-round development of the state.

Yours etc.,
NK Kehar,
Shillong -3

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

"Curiosity is the one thing invincible in Nature."
— Freya Stark

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Democracy Demands Respect for Dissenting Voices

THE uprising by the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) is legitimate as it protests what is seen as a failure to ensure that one of the most challenging entrance examination for entering the medical profession – the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) is conducted flawlessly. The first NEET examination this year saw leaked question papers, sending lakhs of students who spent precious hours studying for the examination into depression. Many who did well the first time saw their marks plummet this time. Over 20 students who lost all hope of a secure future have ended their lives. Is there any other country where students must pass through such trauma to enter the medical entrance examination? Not in recent times. India has become infamous for this fiasco. In such a situation, the student population is expected to rise up to demand accountability from the ruling government and that is what they did under the leadership of Abhijeet Dipke who decided to return to India from the US where he was studying and start a protest at Delhi's Jantar Mantar. Ladakh-based scientist and activist Sonam Wangchuk lent his support to the cause and undertook an indefinite hunger strike at Jantar Mantar even as his health started deteriorating. On July 18, armed with a High Court order, Delhi Police forcefully and surreptitiously took Wangchuk to Safdarjang Hospital.

The CJP had been priming itself to march to Parliament on July 20 when the monsoon session would begin. Accordingly a large contingent gathered at Jantar Mantar to march toward Parliament in an orderly manner, shouting slogans demanding the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. This has been their consistent demand and any other Government would have shown deference to such an organic public protest. But not the Modi Government, which, in the face of such internal crises prefers to adopt a stunning silence in an attitude that challenges the protestors, as of to say that the Government can do no wrong and that anyone protesting against any of its acts of omission and commission are enemies of this country or as they would like to term them anti-nationals or urban naxals.

It is admirable and hope-giving that the student community of Meghalaya also lent its weight to the CJP and protested peacefully to show solidarity with their fellow-protestors in New Delhi. The culture of protest is a sine qua non of democracy. Any Government that has not learnt the art of engaging with its citizens on issues they considers necessary to review or rescind is a Government that has no respect for public opinion or for democratic tenets. Indeed, for a long time now, protestors have been jailed as if they are enemies of the country. Umar Khalid is a case in point. Fr Stan Swamy is another example of the Modi Government's propensity to crush all voices of dissent. Fr Stan Swamy finally breathed his last in jail and for what? For giving his entire life to the cause of the tribals of Jharkhand. In other words the Modi Government is averse to giving tribals their rights. All right-thinking citizens need to support the CJP protest before democracy loses its ethos and meaning.

Meghalaya Government's Quiet War Against Its Own Farmers

By Napoleon S. Mawphniang

There's something almost mythological about a farmer. Think about it. He is Atlas, really — carrying the entire weight of a civilization on his shoulders, bent double over red soil at five in the morning, while the rest of us sleep. He feeds the judge, the politician, the bureaucrat, the minister. And yet — and yet — when his crops come to market, nobody wants to pay him what his sweat is worth.

This is not new. It's an ancient wound. But in Meghalaya in 2025 and 2026, that wound has been left deliberately open.

Let me begin with a number that should make every elected representative in this state sit down in uncomfortable silence. Broom grass prices in Meghalaya collapsed by over 60% in just two years — from Rs 12,188 per quintal in 2022-23 to a devastating Rs 4,685 per quintal in 2024-25. These are not my numbers. These came from Agriculture Minister Ampareen Lyngdoh herself, on the floor of our Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, on March 6, 2025. (India Today NE, "Meghalaya tackles plummeting broom prices," March 6, 2025.)

Sixty percent. Let that settle.

If your salary was cut by 60% over two years, would you call it a minor inconvenience? Or would you call it a catastrophe? And broom grass is only one story. In Ri Bhoi and West Khasi Hills, farmer groups submitted formal memorandums as recently as February 2026, demanding Minimum Support Price coverage for areca nut and ginger — two of the state's most significant cash crops. The response from district officials was roughly this: We'll forward your concerns to higher authorities. (NE Frontier, "Farmers in Ri-Bhoi and West Khasi Hills Demand MSP Support," February 26, 2026.)

Higher authorities. That phrase. Kafka would have recognized it immediately. Now, ask yourself — in the tradition of Socrates, who believed a question honestly posed is worth more than a dishonest answer — what exactly does the Meghalaya State Agricultural arketing Board do?

Check their public portal. As of last Friday, July 17, 2026 (please please check), the MSAMB website lists market prices for a handful of commodities. Banana. Cabbage. Potato. Arecanut. Broomstick. (MSAMB Portal, megamb.gov.in, July 2026.)

That's it. That's the entire visible infrastructure of a state agricultural marketing system serving hundreds of thousands of farming families. A webpage with six commodity prices.

Is this governance? Or is this a theatrical performance of governance?There's a difference. Wittgenstein warned us that language can disguise thought. A "marketing board" that functions only as a data display board is not a marketing board. It's a signboard. And signboards don't buy your ginger when the market price collapses.

The deeper philosophical question here — and I want you to stay with me on this — is about what Paulo Freire called the culture of silence. Freire, writing about the oppressed, argued that systems of power don't always oppress through violence. Sometimes they oppress by making the marginalized feel that their suffering is natural. Inevitable. Nobody's fault.

When a Ri Bhoi farmer watches his ginger fetch Rs 25 per kilogram — barely covering transport costs — and nobody in Shillong calls an emergency session of the legislature, what message does that send? It sends this: your pain is ordinary. Your loss is expected. We have noted it in the register. But it isn't ordinary. It's a structural crime. And crimes need names. Noam Chomsky, in Manufacturing Consent, argued that institutions often manufacture the appearance of concern without the substance of action. Let's examine the evidence with the cool detachment of a Holmesian investigator.

Exhibit A: The government announces CM-ASSURE in January 2025 — a market intervention scheme. Rs 100 crore dedicated fund. Sounds impressive. (Times of India, January 10, 2025.)

Exhibit B: The scheme covers only non-perishable crops. Ginger, turmeric, areca nut, and broom grass. What about perishables? What about that cabbage rotting in a Nongpoh truck because there's no cold chain? What about vegetables — which, according to analysis published in The Shillong Times on March 18, 2025, Meghalaya imports 90% of, while its own farmers sell at distress prices?

Exhibit C: During February 2026, farmers in Ri Bhoi — my own district, my own farmer friends — are still submitting memorandums. Still being told to wait. Still not covered under any national MSP framework because areca nut and ginger are not in the central government's mandated 22-crop list.

The scheme exists. The farmers still cry. Something doesn't add up. René Girard spoke about the scapegoat mechanism — the human tendency to deflect systemic blame onto convenient victims. In Meghalaya's agricultural politics, the scapegoat is always the market. The market fell. What can we do? But markets don't fall on their own. They fall because governments don't build the procurement infrastructure, cold storage chains, value-addition facilities, and export corridors that would give farmers options beyond the mercy of a middleman.

The Shillong Times itself, reporting in May 2025 on turmeric farmers, noted that prices crash post-harvest — dropping from Rs 170-180 per kilogram in lean months to Rs 70-90 per kilogram when the crop is ready. (Shillong Times, "Unstable prices, lack of markets trouble state's turmeric farmers," May 7, 2025.) The government-sanctioned Mawiong market near Shillong is described as "not sufficient." Lakadong turmeric — a product of international GI-tag quality — receives the same farm-gate price as ordinary turmeric because there's no grading system.

We have a GI tag. We don't have a grading shed. We have a marketing board. We don't have market power. That's the story in a single terrible sentence.

Ambedkar once wrote that political democracy cannot succeed where social and economic democracy do not exist. I'd add to that: agricultural democracy cannot exist where price democracy is absent. A farmer who cannot negotiate the price of his own labour is not a free man. He's a serf with a mobile phone.

And here's the sharpest Socratic question I want to leave you with: if the government budgeted Rs 618 crore for agriculture in 2025-26 — a 43% jump from the previous year (India Today NE, March 6, 2025) — and farmers in Ri Bhoi were still marching to district offices in February 2026 demanding basic price support, where exactly did that money go?

Who asked? Who audited? Who answered?

Dostoyevsky, in The Brothers Karamazov, wrote that every society is judged by how it treats its most vulnerable. The Meghalayan farmer — isolated in the hills, without irrigation, without credit, without storage, without a guaranteed floor price — is among the most vulnerable people in India's most naturally blessed state.

We export organic ginger to Dubai. (Shillong Times, July 15, 2025.) - but. but. but... We can't feed our own farmers a living wage (that's sad). That's not irony. That's an indictment.

I write this not as a partisan. I write this as someone from this soil, especially one who is a friend of farmers, who has watched neighbours sell their turmeric for less than the cost of the seeds that grew it. I write this because silence — the kind Freire warned about — is how systems survive their own failures.

The soil of Meghalaya is rich. Its farmers are resilient. But resilience isn't infinite. And patience — that most abused virtue of people with low incomes — eventually runs out. The government must act. Not with another committee, not with another portal displaying six commodity prices, not with another scheme that covers twenty thousand farmers while four hundred thousand wait. It must act with real procurement. Real price floors. Real market infrastructure. Real answers.

Because the alternative is this: one morning, the farmers stop farming. And then all the ministerial budgets in the world won't grow a single grain.

(The writer is a practising advocate and writes as a concerned citizen with no partisan affiliation).

Potential US President deserves kudos for slamming Israel like never before

By S. N. M. Abdi

Rahm Emanuel, a likely Democratic candidate for the 2028 Presidency, has just taken off Israel's pants and publicly caned the Zionist state making headlines in the United States, Israel and the Western world. But the Indian media seems to have deliberately blacked out Emanuel's blistering, unprecedented criticism of Tel Aviv and Benjamin Netanyahu, which is echoing across the globe, in order to remain in the good books of the Bharatiya Janata Party Government and the Israeli Embassy in Delhi.

Frankly, I couldn't believe my own ears when I heard Emanuel tell a packed hall in Tel Aviv University that Netanyahu is today running a "pariah" state. Moreover, he demanded US sanctions against Israelis who attack Palestinian civilians and their homes, schools, mosques and hospitals, including officials who give the go-ahead to the violence and "every construction company or bank" engaged in building in Israeli settlements in occupied areas of the West Bank. No American leader has ever gone as far as that, making the denunciation unprecedented, unparalleled and worthy of a standing ovation in every democracy where human rights and ordinary lives matter.

The no-holds-barred criticism is groundbreaking because Emanuel is no firebrand Zohran Mamdani or an Omar Ilhan. He is a proven establishment centrist and a Democratic Party elder who was President Barrack Obama's Chief of Staff, President Bill Clinton's Advisor, Chicago Mayor for two terms and Ambassador to Japan. Even more importantly, the man who was in the room when important decisions were taken, delivered the stinging speech in the heart of the Zionist state clearly with a 2028 Presidential run in mind. He apparently got his speech vetted by Obama and the Clintons who openly endorsed it after it was delivered.

His agenda is no longer a secret: he wants to overhaul the narrative about US-Israel relations – which were once considered sacrosanct -- in the run-up to the coming elections. He wants a reset in the US policy of unconditional and unwavering support for Israel.

Voicing an openly leftward shift, Emanuel announced from a podium in Tel Aviv itself that the US fundamentally needs a new and different approach to the alliance with Israel. In his words, "Unconditional support has produced a prime minister who has presumed that his strategic interest would incur no political costs if he ignored America's concerns about settlements and sparked a regional war. For too long, American policy towards Israel operated under the assumption that the best thing Washington could do for Jerusalem was to blindly and silently stand behind Israel, without conditions, without demands, and without consequences when we disagreed. And that has been our mistake. It cannot stand or survive as it has been. We need significant changes and a new direction."

He virtually told Netanyahu in his den that "your actions have turned Israel into a pariah on the world stage. The United States cannot continue to finance and support you in silence. You cannot fight indefinitely against a world that has stopped believing that you have the right to fight. You must instead find a new, sustainable path to peace, security and prosperity. America stands ready."

One can't agree more with Emanuel's remarks that the world has stopped believing that Israel has the right to fight -- thanks to its genocide in Gaza and war crimes! A recent survey by The Associated Press-NORC Centre for Public Affairs Research revealed that 58 percent of Democrats felt that the US is "too supportive" of Israelis – up from 45 percent in January 2024. Today half of Americans believe that Israel has committed genocide against Palestinians in Gaza after the October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel. This is the basis for Emanuel's assertion that the whole world thinks that Israel has forfeited the right the fight any more because its fight has become blatantly and unquestionably genocidal.

In Tel Aviv he also demanded an end to US subsidies to Israel's defence budget, arguing that the country should foot the bill for armaments like any other ally instead of getting them free. According to him, "Israel should be able to buy American arms under the same financial terms, the same restrictions, and the same requirements as every other trusted ally that abides by our laws." If this is strictly and genuinely enforced, Israel will not be eligible to buy US arms even against payments as it clearly does not abide by US laws which prohibit supplying arms to militaries blocking humanitarian aid and committing war crimes.

Only the future will tell how Emanuel will cope with the wrath of America's extremely rich and retributive pro-Israel lobby when his Presidential bid gathers momentum within the Democratic Party. He has openly declared that he is eyeing the Presidency and there is no reason to doubt his intentions. He is only 66 years old and blessed with good health. He should be given full credit for suddenly triggering a reappraisal of Washington-Tel Aviv ties which are, in reality, an albatross around America's neck. Voters' preferences on the Israel-Palestine question matter a lot today as US Democrats and Republicans debate the issue both publicly and behind closed doors. It's a pity that there is no such rethinking in the United Kingdom where even the Labour Party has no qualms about blindly backing Israel and betraying Palestine. Let's see if any British politician takes a leaf out of Emanuel's book and musters the courage to rap Israel on the knuckles. (END)

(S. N. M. Abdi is a distinguished journalist who writes on domestic politics and foreign policy.)

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Letters to the Editor

Lapalang Tragedy: A Story of Bravery and Loss

Editor,

They had left home early that morning, but none of them returned home alive. The news shook everyone to the core. Three young labourers, Pynskhemlang Mawthoh, Rapborlang Nongspung, and Elka Shadap, were trapped inside a 33-foot underground water reservoir at Lapalang, which was filled with deadly carbon monoxide.

What touched everyone's heart was the unmatched bravery of local residents Sunil Thakuri and Umesh Thakuri, who rushed in without a second thought to rescue the trapped labourers after hearing their cries for help. Their courage and the spirit of serving humanity deserve the highest respect. Usually, simple-hearted people never stop to calculate danger; they simply jump in when someone screams for help. This time, that instinct cost them their lives! What is even more heartbreaking is that rescuers Sunil and Umesh, who were brothers, were the sole breadwinners of their humble family. Their loss has dealt a devastating blow to their elderly parents and young children, all of whom depended on them.

Well, the saddest fact is that those three labourers worked at a highly unsafe site, where the risks were obvious but ignored. They did so only because survival demanded it. In Shillong city and its nearby areas, such labourers are "innumerable". Their economic conditions are so poor that they are forced to accept "dangerous jobs". Look at how many poor labourers have lost their lives while working in rat-hole coal mines in Jaintia Hills. It was never by choice, but by compulsion. If they do not take the job, their family members will starve. In a true sense, the cries of pain and the pangs of such poverty-stricken people always remain unheard by the authorities concerned.

This gas tragedy again raises fundamental questions about workplace safety in the state. How was such hazardous work inside a confined space "allowed" to happen without proper safety measures in place? Why were workers sent underground or down a shaft without protective gear against invisible dangers like odourless and colourless carbon monoxide? Can the Meghalaya Pollution Control Board and the State Disaster Management Authority escape accountability? No, not at all. Sadly, safety checks, emergency plans, and protective equipment were completely missing, and the price was paid by poor, innocent labourers. How will the authorities deal with the proprietor of this plant now? This tragedy should now serve as a wake-up call for the government.

At least, it is heartening to know that some organisations and institutions are coming forward to extend financial support to the bereaved families. The initiative taken by senior journalist Patricia Mukhim in the cause is highly inspiring. Unlike other journalists, Madam Mukhim has always been known to walk the extra mile whenever humanitarian emergencies arise. Indeed, when people of influence act with compassion, it "inspires" countless others. Her heartfelt gesture has encouraged many now to come forward and contribute to this noble cause.

Yes, life is impermanent. We never know how or when our end will come. The true measure of a life is not in its length or in the wealth we amass, but in the kindness and empathy we leave behind. Life is best lived when we live for others.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

Equal Opportunity for EWS Students in Meghalaya

Editor,

Meghalaya has always been known for its rich culture, diversity, and communal harmony. It is precisely because I love this State and consider it my home that I write this letter with both hope and concern.

I fully understand and support the need for reservations for Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes in Meghalaya. I also understand why there is no OBC reservation in the State, as Meghalaya does not have a notified State OBC list. Every policy has its historical and constitutional reasons, and protecting the rights and interests of the indigenous communities of our State is both important and necessary.

However, one question continues to trouble me. Why is there no reservation at all for students belonging to the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) category in MBBS admissions under the Meghalaya State Quota or even in the Central Pool seats allotted to the State?

EWS reservation is based not on caste or community, but on economic circumstances. By not providing any seats for economically weaker students of the general category, are we unintentionally sending a message that every general category student in Meghalaya is financially well-off and does not deserve any consideration? Poverty does not discriminate between communities, and neither should our concern for economically disadvantaged students.

What makes this even more concerning is that Meghalaya has started issuing EWS certificates. Citizens are required to undergo the entire verification process every time they apply or renew their certificates. If the State recognizes the existence of economically weaker citizens by issuing such certificates, should it not also consider extending meaningful benefits to them within the State itself?

The EWS certificates issued by Meghalaya can indeed be used for admissions and reservations under the Central Government. However, the State must also not neglect the economically weaker non-tribal citizens who have been born and brought up here for generations and proudly call Meghalaya their home. They too look towards the Government with hopes and aspirations for their future.

Unfortunately, many discussions concerning non-tribal citizens are often limited to what they should or should not be allowed to do. We regularly come across debates surrounding trade licences and other restrictions, but very little attention is given to framing fair and transparent mechanisms that would allow genuine non-tribal citizens to pursue livelihoods without unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles or discrimination. Similarly, very few voices are raised when economically weaker students belonging to the general category are left without any form of reservation or affirmative support in State MBBS admissions.

This is not a demand to take away anyone else's rights or opportunities. It is merely an appeal to ensure that no economically disadvantaged citizen of Meghalaya feels forgotten.

I humbly suggest that the Government look into introducing appropriate EWS reservation or other suitable mechanisms in State MBBS admissions and Central Pool seats allotted to Meghalaya. A truly progressive State is not one where a single community prospers alone, but one where every community grows together while respecting each other's rights and identities.

We are often taught in our science classes that biodiversity strengthens an ecosystem and makes it resilient. Similarly, the prosperity of a State lies not in the advancement of one section alone, but in ensuring that every section is given an opportunity to contribute towards its development.

Lastly, I would like to request the Government to give greater attention to the condition of schools and colleges in our villages. Not every tribal brother or sister of mine can afford to leave their homes and come to Shillong in search of quality education. They deserve equal opportunities in this increasingly competitive world, and it is the Government's responsibility to provide those opportunities through quality schools, libraries, internet connectivity, competent teachers, and adequate educational infrastructure in their own villages.

It pains me to read reports that Meghalaya's literacy rate is declining. Back in my native village in Bihar, people still speak of Shillong with admiration and say that the quality of education here is among the finest. I sincerely hope that this reputation only grows stronger with time and never diminishes.

Let Meghalaya become an example—not merely of protecting its rich culture and indigenous heritage, but also of ensuring that no economically disadvantaged citizen feels invisible in the land they proudly call home.

Yours etc.,
Ekramul Haque,
Via email

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"Nature can do more than physicians."
— Oliver Cromwell

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Empire rattled

EMPIRE was not shaken, but rattled. A large crowd of students converging at Jantar Mantar at the call of a just-sprouted, internet-induced activist movement and staging a Sansad Chalo march on the opening day of Parliament's Monsoon Session has stressed a point loud and clear. It was that the establishment can no longer take the educated youth of the country for granted. Curiously, however, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's belated response, at an event in Parliament House on Tuesday, gave no solace to the protesting students. He skirted their demands and beat around the bush. This is a serious provocation. Students deserve a better deal.

Notably, however, while leaders of the movement were detained and its popular face, Sonam Wangchuk, forcibly shifted to a hospital also to thwart his participation in the march, the empire failed to strike back. It was rather on the defensive. A mild lathi-charge it made was only for effect and to save its blurred face. The discomfiture of the Modi government was all too evident. Note that it closed the Metro Stations in central Delhi for hours to thwart large-scale presence of youths in the Sansad Chalo March. Modi's statement now is that it's the "responsibility of the nation" to conduct tests like NEET in an error-free manner. Yet, it exposed his government's ineptitude leading to the leakage of test papers, cancellation of the test and resultant suicide of at least 20 students. It needs reassertion that these students, like millions more across states, were unable to bear the trauma of an abrupt cancellation of the exam for which they had mentally prepared for years. Meanwhile the protesters under the banner of the recently formed Cockroach Janata Party cocked a snook not only at the government but also at the rusted systems represented by the likes of Chief Justice Surya Kant. The protesters sought the resignation of education minister Dharmendra Pradhan, release of Wangchuk and payment of a Rs 1 crore compensation to the families of each of the students who died of suicide. Starkly, Modi was mum on all these points in his speech. In fact, the PM himself should shoulder the responsibility for the NEET fiasco. It is well-acknowledged that his government lacks talented individuals to handle key departments. Pradhan has no serious exposure to academic matters. He's a run of the mill politician. Education is not his forte. When qualified persons handle various ministries in other countries, India's systems are hijacked by street-smart politicians. Corrupt elements with political patronage are lurking in every corner to subvert the systems and make hay. The strength of the system of democracy get eroded thus.

Ironically however, even the Opposition is found wanting. The Congress party's weak-kneed response to the students' offensive against the system flaws and governmental ineptness is unacceptable. Party chief Mallikarjun Kharge and Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi should have been in the forefront to take on the government when situations like the NEET fiasco unfolded – and repeatedly. Perceptions strengthen that beyond Modi's blah-blahs from the podium, things are drifting on multiple fronts. Many of his ministers are faceless wonders.

Sonam Wangchuk, Cockroach Janta Party and the Politics of Paranoia

By Rajdeep Sardesai

Conspiracy theories have always thrived in the power corridors of Delhi. But in today's hyper-polarised India, they have become more than just idle gossip. They are now political weapons, deployed to delegitimise opponents, discredit protests and avoid engaging with uncomfortable questions.

The latest targets are Sonam Wangchuk and the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP), two of the most visible faces associated with the student protests that have shaken the national capital. Instead of asking why thousands of young Indians are angry over paper leaks, delayed examinations and shrinking job opportunities, sections of the political establishment appear more interested in questioning the motives of those leading the protests.

According to one widely circulated theory amongst Congress groups, Wangchuk and the CJP are somehow part of the Modi government's "deep state", planted to prevent the Congress from receiving political credit for taking the lead in raking up the NEET exam mess. The evidence for such an extraordinary claim is almost non-existent. But in an age where suspicion travels faster than facts, conspiracy theories quickly acquire a life of their own.

Take the curious case of Sonam Wangchuk. Less than a year ago, as the movement for greater autonomy in Ladakh gathered momentum and briefly turned violent, Wangchuk was detained under the National Security Act. He spent six months in jail before being released without any convincing explanation as to why he had been incarcerated in the first place. During those months, sections of the BJP's online ecosystem portrayed him as a foreign-funded, "anti-national", even a "pro-China agent", selectively editing his speeches to fit a convenient political narrative.

Now, remarkably, the very same individual is being described by some Congress voices as an Intelligence Bureau puppet, allegedly planted to divert attention from Rahul Gandhi and the Congress's own campaign against the Modi government. How does someone go from being branded a Chinese sympathiser to being accused of serving the Indian establishment? Such contradictions expose the absurdity of political paranoia.

Allow me a personal observation. I have known Sonam Wangchuk for nearly two decades. I first met him in 2008 when CNN-IBN honoured him as a "Real Hero" for his pioneering work in education and environmental conservation. In the audience that evening sat Aamir Khan, who would later star in Three Idiots, a super-hit film many believed drew inspiration from Wangchuk's life, even though the filmmakers have denied any direct connection.

Over the years, I have watched Wangchuk dedicate himself to education, sustainable development and the future of Ladakh. Whether one agrees with every position he takes is beside the point. Democracies are built precisely on the acceptance that disagreement does not amount to disloyalty. Which raises an uncomfortable question. How does a Ramon Magsaysay Award winner once celebrated across the political spectrum suddenly become, depending on who is speaking, either a traitor or a government agent?

The irony becomes even sharper when one remembers that the Modi government itself had publicly praised Wangchuk's work on more than one occasion. In March 2023, Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan posted a picture on X after meeting Wangchuk and his wife, appreciating their efforts to transform education through innovation, experiential learning and sustainable development. Three years later, after Wangchuk has become one of the prominent faces demanding accountability over the NEET controversy and questioning the government's handling of education, the admiration has vanished. Instead, suspicion has replaced engagement.

There is another telling episode. The Leh Autonomous Hill Development Council had initially approved the lease of more than 1,000 kanals of land for Wangchuk's Himalayan Institute of Alternatives, Ladakh (HIAL), an ambitious project devoted to sustainable Himalayan development. Last August, the lease was cancelled, officially over procedural delays. Few in Ladakh doubt that Wangchuk's growing role in the autonomy movement had become politically inconvenient and his institution was selectively targeted.

That, ultimately, is what happens when dissent is viewed not as democratic participation but as an act of hostility. Those who question authority become targets for intimidation or character assassination. This has been a standard playbook for the Modi government: from political opponents to journalists, academics, civil society activists, few have been spared the wrath of unbridled state power.

Yet the Congress appears trapped in its own insecurities. Instead of embracing a movement whose central demands broadly echo its own criticism of the government's education record, sections of the party seem determined to view every independent protest through the lens of political conspiracy.

The Cockroach Janata Party illustrates this mindset perfectly. For months, the Modi government dismissed the CJP as little more than an internet curiosity. Only after student protests spilled onto the streets this week did it even begin acknowledging their existence. The Congress, meanwhile, has convinced itself that the CJP is little more than an Aam Aadmi Party proxy because its founder, Abhijit Dipke, once had links with AAP.

The anxiety is understandable. The Congress still carries the scars of 2011, when the Anna Hazare movement, supported quietly by the BJP, eventually paved the way for the rise of AAP and accelerated the decline of the UPA government.

History casts a long shadow. But history should not become a prison.

Why should the principal opposition party distance itself from a movement highlighting failures in an education system it has consistently criticised? Why refuse to engage with young Indians merely because some organisers have uncertain political backgrounds?

My own interactions with several members of the CJP suggest they are driven less by party politics than by frustration with the system. They may be inexperienced, idealistic, occasionally disorganised and politically naïve. But dismissing them as agents of one political formation or another is easier than listening to what they are actually saying. That is the larger tragedy.

The Modi government, secure and domineering after twelve years in power, increasingly appears convinced that dissent can simply be ignored or overwhelmed. Critics become enemies, protestors become conspirators and inconvenient questions are brushed aside. For the government, the CJP is yet another attempt by malcontents with foreign links to undermine an elected prime minister.

The Congress risks making the opposite mistake. By seeing hidden hands everywhere, it may end up alienating precisely the young citizens whose aspirations it hopes to represent.

India's youth deserve better than becoming pawns in competing conspiracy theories. They deserve answers on paper leaks, delayed recruitment, crumbling public education and shrinking employment opportunities. They deserve governments willing to listen and oppositions willing to lead. Above all, they deserve a political class that responds to genuine public anger with empathy instead of suspicion.

In the end, conspiracy theories are often the refuge of insecure politics. Democracies flourish not when every protest is viewed through the prism of hidden agendas, but when those in power—and those seeking power—have the confidence to engage with uncomfortable truths.

Less paranoia. More accountability. India's young citizens deserve nothing less.

(The writer is senior journalist and author. Mail: rajdeepsardesai52@gmail.com)

Is India Still a Democratic Nation?

By Baiamutlang Khymdeit

The Preamble to the Constitution of India proudly declares:

"We, the People of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a **Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic** and to secure to all its citizens: **Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity**"

The word "Democratic Republic" is not merely a constitutional phrase. It represents the promise that the people of India are the true custodians of democracy. It assures every citizen the right to express opinions freely, assemble peacefully, question those in power, and participate in shaping the nation's future. These ideals are further protected under Article 19 of the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech and expression, the right to assemble peacefully without arms, and the right to form associations.

Yet, as I watch the events unfolding in our capital today, I find myself asking a question that many Indians are quietly asking, Is India still living up to its constitutional promise as a democratic republic?

The recent movement at Jantar Mantar has reignited this debate. The protest, led by the student organisation Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) along with renowned engineer and education reformer Sonam Wangchuk, demanded reforms in India's education system. Students alleged that recurring examination paper leaks, irregularities in competitive examinations, inadequate educational infrastructure, and the lack of accountability within educational institutions have eroded public trust. Their movement called for transparency, fairness, quality education, and meaningful reforms to protect the future of millions of young Indians.

Education is not a privilege reserved for a few. it is the foundation upon which every democratic society is built. When students take to the streets demanding a better education system, they are not asking for special treatment. They are asking for the government to fulfil its constitutional responsibility towards the youth of this country.

Sonam Wangchuk is not an ordinary activist. He is one of India's most respected engineers, innovators, education reformers and environmentalists. His innovative Ice Stupa technology has become an internationally recognised solution for water conservation in the Himalayan region. His sustainable engineering innovations have also benefited local communities and provided practical solutions for the Indian Army stationed in extreme high-altitude areas. This is a man who has dedicated his life to serving India, not through politics, but through education, science, innovation, and nation-building. Yet, when he chose to support students by undertaking an indefinite hunger strike, a method deeply rooted in India's democratic tradition, he became the subject of fierce criticism. Many voices on social media questioned his patriotism and labelled him anti-national simply because he stood with students demanding reform.

I ask myself: What exactly was his crime? He did not call for violence, he did not call for hatred, he did not call for the overthrow of the government. He simply exercised his demoeratic right to peacefully protest. And after more than twenty days of fasting at Jantar Mantar, he was removed from the protest site by the authorities and taken to hospital. Whether one agrees with the government's reasons or not, the incident raised serious questions about how peaceful democratic dissent is being handled in modern India.

Moreover, the events of July 20 made those questions even more urgent. As we saw through the media, thousands of students began a peaceful march from Jantar Mantar towards Parliament, hoping their voices would finally be heard. Instead, the march was stopped by the police. Reports and videos from the protest showed police using barricades, lathi charges and tear gas as they attempted to disperse the crowd. Watching those scenes, I could not help but ask: Is peacefully demanding educational reform now considered a threat? Is exercising our constitutional right to peaceful assembly wrong? Is criticising government policies now unacceptable in the world's largest democracy?

We all know that Democracy is not measured only by the conduct of elections. Elections may determine who governs us, but democracy determines how those in power treat those who disagree with them. A government confident in its democratic legitimacy should welcome criticism, not fear it. It should answer peaceful protests with dialogue rather than force.

Across India, many citizens have also expressed concern over restrictions affecting certain online voices and public figures critical of government policies. Regardless of the legal reasons behind individual cases, the broader perception that dissenting voices face increasing pressure should concern every citizen. Democracy flourishes when diverse opinions coexist, not when disagreement becomes something people fear.

As Indians, we often take pride in remembering our freedom struggle. During British rule, countless Indians were imprisoned, lathi-charged and silenced simply because they demanded freedom. Today, independent India is fundamentally different from colonial India, but any instance where peaceful protesters are met with excessive force naturally reminds us of a painful chapter in our history. Our freedom fighters did not sacrifice their lives merely so that Indians could vote every five years. They fought so that every citizen could live with dignity, liberty and justice. They envisioned an India where governments would remain accountable to the people, not the other way around.

Democracy does not weaken when citizens question authority. It weakens when citizens become afraid to do so. The Constitution never promised us a government that would always be right. It promised us the freedom to question any government whenever we believed it had gone wrong. If peaceful protest becomes difficult, if criticism is increasingly viewed with suspicion and if young people demanding educational reforms are met with force instead of dialogue, then we must honestly ask ourselves whether we are preserving the spirit of the Constitution or merely its words.

I write this not out of hatred for my country, but out of love for it. True patriotism is not blind obedience. True patriotism is believing that India can be better, and having the courage to say so. The Preamble begins with the words "We, the People of India." Those words remind us that democracy belongs to the people, not to any political party, government, ideology or individual.

If we can no longer question those in power, if we can no longer peacefully assemble to seek justice, if we begin to fear exercising the very rights guaranteed by our Constitution, then the question before us becomes unavoidable: Is India still the democratic republic our Constitution promised it would be?

(The author is Assistant Professor Political Science Dept., Ri Bhoi Synod College)

Letters to the Editor

From Cabbage to Radish: Our Farmers are Desperate - No Future without Farmers

Editor,

The heartbreaking scenes unfolding across Meghalaya should shake the conscience of every citizen and policymaker. Only days after cabbage growers in the Smit area were forced to distribute nearly six tonnes of cabbage free of cost because they could not find buyers, another tragedy has emerged. Farmers in Nongthliew, East Khasi Hills, are now dumping heaps of freshly harvested radish in their fields as prices have crashed to an unsustainable Rs 2 to Rs 4 per kilogram.

These are not isolated incidents. They are symptoms of a deeply broken agricultural marketing system that is failing the very people who feed our society. A society is judged by how it treats the hands that feed it. Supporting our farmers is not an act of charity, it is an investment in our own future. Every fruit, every vegetable, and every grain that reaches our dining table comes from someone's sacrifice, determination, and months of relentless hard work. If we cannot protect those who produce our food, we cannot claim to value food security.

A farmer does not simply grow vegetables but cultivates life itself. Before the first rays of sunlight reach our homes, farmers are already in their fields, battling unpredictable weather, rising input costs, pests, transportation challenges, and uncertain markets. Yet after months of labour, they are forced to sell their produce at prices that do not even recover the cost of cultivation.

The situation in Nongthliew is particularly alarming. Farmers invested heavily in seeds, fertilisers, irrigation, transportation, and loan repayments, only to be offered prices as low as Rs 2 to Rs 4 per kilogram. Many have no option but to dump perfectly good radish in open fields because harvesting costs more than the returns.

To make matters worse, farmers allege that middlemen dictate prices without giving cultivators any bargaining power. They also claim that traders deduct one kilogram for every ten kilograms purchased, causing further financial losses. Such practices not only exploit farmers but also rob them of the dignity and reward they deserve for their labour.

Many cultivators have taken loans to finance their crops and are now struggling to repay them. As one farmer painfully remarked, even Rs 10 to Rs 15 per kilogram would at least allow them to recover their cultivation costs. At the current prices, however, they are sinking deeper into debt and despair.

The tragedy worsens because Meghalaya produces some of the freshest and healthiest agricultural products in the country. Much of our produce is naturally grown with minimal chemical inputs, making it increasingly valuable in an age where consumers seek healthy and organic food. Yet ironically, the very hands that nourish us are themselves struggling to survive.

These recurring crises are not simply about cabbage or radish or about one crop or one season. They demand an urgent need for comprehensive agricultural reforms. Farmers require transparent markets, fair pricing mechanisms, regulated trading practices, better storage facilities, cold-chain infrastructure, food processing units, value-addition opportunities, and stronger market linkages beyond the state. Agriculture cannot continue to depend solely on middlemen who dictate prices while farmers bear all the risks.

The farmers' movement in Delhi reminded the nation of one undeniable truth - whether in the plains of Punjab or the hills of Meghalaya, the aspiration is the same. The recent experiences of Meghalaya's farmers remind us of a simple but powerful truth: farmers are not asking for charity; they are asking for fairness. They only seek the opportunity to earn a dignified livelihood through honest labour. Their voices must be heard and lead to meaningful action.

To the hardworking farmers of Meghalaya, I wish to say this: please do not lose hope. Your labour is never in vain. Your perseverance feeds every family, strengthens our economy, protects our environment, preserves our traditions, and safeguards the future of generations yet to come. The people of Meghalaya stand with you, and your struggle deserves the immediate attention of every policymaker and every citizen.

As consumers, we too have a responsibility. Let us choose locally grown produce whenever possible; support our village market; appreciate the dignity of farming, and encourage our youth to see agriculture not as a profession of last resort but as a profession of honour, innovation, and nation-building.

When farmers prosper, our villages become stronger; our economy grows more resilient, and our food security remains protected. A prosperous Meghalaya cannot be built upon the hardship and suffering of its farmers.

A nation's true wealth is not measured by the height of its buildings but by the strength of the hands that grow its food. Let us honour our farmers not merely with words of appreciation but with policies of justice, fair markets, and meaningful action.

Let us not forget the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic. When lockdowns brought normal life to a standstill, markets were shut, vehicles were restricted, and the transportation of food from outside the state was severely disrupted, many families struggled to obtain essential food supplies and had to ration what little they had. During that difficult period, it was our local farmers who continued working tirelessly in their fields, ensuring that fresh vegetables and essential food reached our communities despite immense challenges. They became the backbone of our food security when the world around us came to a halt.

It is therefore ironic and deeply unjust that the very farmers who sustained us during one of the darkest chapters in recent history are today struggling to sustain themselves. If we could depend on them in our time of greatest need, surely they deserve our unwavering support, fair prices, and meaningful protection today because without farmers, there is no food. Without food, there is no future. When we protect our farmers, we protect our future. If we continue to allow our farmers to harvest losses instead of hope, we will one day harvest hunger instead of prosperity.

Yours etc.,
Augusten Blah,
Shillong

Parents' worst tragedy

Editor

Losing a child is a tragic and painful thing that could ever happen to parents. The tragedy that had befallen the two families who lost their children on July 15 in Umtangling village can only be imagined by many of us but the pain and loss can only be felt by the parents of these young boys. What happened to the three boys should not have happened if the authority concerned – the MeECL had paid heed to the tidings of less important people. The lives of the 11, 12 and 15 year old boys were snatched away from this earth only because they happened to step on a live electrical wire out of ignorance of the dangers it presented.

The lackadaisical attitude of those in control of the Power Sector has led to the untimely death of the boys who have not even seen much of the world yet. Now, the question that comes next is how precious are these lives? Certainly, for the parents, the lives of their children are the most valuable and precious. For that matter any parent would go to any extent to protect their flesh and blood. On that fateful day, the death of the boys left a void in the hearts of the parents that can never be filled. The greater loss though was that of the 3 lives. For the parents no amount of compensation would be able to compensate the loss of lives of their children. What is truly needed is for those at fault and those responsible for this act of carelessness to be severely punished. The parents can never get their sons back but they can at least find solace and be comforted when they see that justice is served.

Stringent action must be taken against those responsible so that it could act as a deterrent against such irresponsible acts. As a parent I can only offer my condolences and empathize with the parents and pray that such a thing should never befall anyone else.

Yours etc.,
Jenniefer Dkhar,
Via email

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

"Eagles don't flock, you have to find them one at a time."

—Ross Perot

The Shillong Times

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Farmers at Breaking Point

IN Meghalaya farmers operate independently because the practice of Farmers' Producers Organisations (FPO) -where prices are decided by farmers as a collective without a middleman acting as an agent - is absent. Middlemen exploit vulnerable farmers by leveraging unequal power dynamics. They conceal real market rates, manipulate weighing scales, and dictate prices. Because many farmers lack direct market access and reliable storage, they are forced to accept low prices to prevent their highly perishable crops from spoiling. Hence the sharp fall in cabbage prices to Rs 2 per kg ultimately resulted in frustrated farmers giving their cabbages away free to passers-by. The sharp fall in cabbage prices is due to a glut of cabbages in an unorganised and weak market—meaning production far outweighs local consumption while the export market remains sporadic.

A visit to the rural outback of Meghalaya during this season reveals hectares of cabbage grown without adequate market surveys regarding potential demand. When too much cabbage reaches the market simultaneously, vendors exploit farmers by drastically lowering prices. Farmers have no option but to sell at the buyer's price rather than let their cabbages rot on the farms, since cabbage is highly perishable. When supply suddenly exceeds what traders and consumers can absorb, prices collapse. The export market to Assam and other neighbouring states fluctuates constantly, leaving producers high and dry. Whereas in the Garo Hills trains have made exporting vegetables and other produce easier, more regular and efficient, farmers in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills depend on roads and any disruption due to floods etc., directly impacts exports and in turn, the farmers. It is to overcome all these hiccups that the Meghalaya Farmers' Commisison was constituted. At one time it worked well because the person at the top was actively engaged and interested in empowering farmers. Now that Commission appears to have lost its way. This is always the problem with personality-driven institutions.

Farmers are supposed to grow crops and other institutions are supposed to handle marketing, etc. Farmers have little bargaining power. They generally sell their products at the farm gate, while the produce passes through traders, transporters and wholesalers before reaching consumers. This gap is huge: while farmers sell their cabbages at Rs 2 a kg, consumers pay upwards of Rs 20 per kg. The crisis, therefore, is not one of over-production but a lack of market organisation and distribution chain. In Meghalaya there is no effective price-support or market intervention mechanism. If the production cost per kilogram of cabbage is Rs 10 while the sale price is Rs 2, the farmer bears the brunt of this price differential. Meanwhile the Hill Farmers Union has demanded a minimum price and a Market Intervention Scheme under which the government would compensate farmers when market prices fall below the cost of production. For a long time Meghalaya has spoken of cold storages etc but these remain only discussion points. Nothing has materialised thereby leaving the farming community high and dry and at the breaking point. A more robust Agricultural Policy is called for at this critical juncture.

The War People & The Making of Khasi Identity

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

When one talks about Khasi history, it feels like groups such as the Synteng and Khynriam receive more attention because of the two great Khasi Himas, viz., Sutnga/Jaintiapur and Shillong (now divided into Hima Khyrim and Hima Mylliem). However, the importance and contribution of the War to the larger Khasi identity are sometimes not given enough importance. In some cases, their identity is being subsumed by other groups. For example, the War are divided into two groups: War-Khasi and War-Jaintia. This is false classification because while Khasi is the term used for an ethnic community, Jaintia is the name of a place, i.e., Hima Jaintiapur. There is only the War, and they are Khasi. The use of the term Jaintia is therefore, highly problematic.

The term Jaintia is derived from Hima Jaintiapur, which was originally a Hindu kingdom that was later conquered by Hima Sutnga. Thereafter, all those who lived within its domain came to be known as Jaintia. Thus, Jaintia, which is derived from the patron Hindu goddess Jainteswari, is an inclusive term and does not denote only the Synteng. However, one finds that only the War are given the appellation Jaintia, and not the Synteng or the Biate. The latter are a non-Khasi group who reside in what is today Saipung. Based on folklore, colonial-era documents, and the work of Khasi scholars such as Hamlet Bareh Ngap Kynta and B. Pakem, they appear to have arrived around 600–800 years ago, making them one of the oldest communities in the Jaintia Hills and predating the founding of Hima Jaintiapur. Yet neither the Biate are called Biate-Jaintia, nor are the Synteng called Synteng-Jaintia—only the War. Now that the kingdom no longer exists, this creates a situation akin to saying that the daughter gave birth to the mother.

Today, the legacy of Hima Jaintiapur is proudly asserted by the Synteng, but it was the War who founded the original kingdom, Hima Sutnga. According to tradition, the first Syiem of Hima Sutnga belonged to the descendants of Ka Li Dokha (a puri) and U Loh Ryndi of kur Tariang from War-Amwi. A version of this story is found in the Jayantia Buranji, where, instead of reflecting the indigenous Khasi cosmology, it is connected to the Hindu goddess Jainteswari, possibly at the behest of the Brahmin priests who exercised considerable influence over the Jaintiapur court. However, the original story of Ka Li Dokha and U Loh Ryndi reminds us that it was always a Khasi story.

In fact, according to oral narratives, in 1669 there was an attempt to impose Hinduism on Raid Tuber by the converted Hindu Syiem of Jaintiapur during the reign of Amratap Singh who wanted to wipe out the indigenous religion. In response, U Woh Tep Khydiat of Tuber Kmaishnong revolted to protect his people from being converted to a foreign religion. A statue of this warrior stands in his village, and recently Sein Raij Tuber commemorated the 357th anniversary of his death. This is similar to what happened among the Ahoms, where the Deodhai (the Ahom priests) and the original Ahom religion were gradually replaced by Brahmins and Hindu myths. I am not sure how many Ahoms still practice their indigenous faith today. Perhaps many have since converted to Hinduism. If so, it would seem that, in the long run, the Brahmins won against the Deodhais, and the Ahom lost their religion.

Going back to the story, considering that the ancestress of Hima Sutnga/Jaintiapur was a divine being, the only human connection found among their descendants is through the War. At that time, Hima Jaintiapur had not yet come into existence, making the application of the composite term "Jaintia" to the Syiem inappropriate. It is therefore more accurate to say that the first Syiem of Hima Sutnga, and the successors who later established Hima Jaintiapur, were War. Indeed, the War must have played a decisive role in the conquest of Jaintiapur, since the Synteng would have had to pass through War territory to reach the plains. Yet, by using the term War-Jaintia, where Jaintia has come to denote the Synteng, the distinct contribution of the War is being disregarded.

Recently, the JHADC CEM, Thombor Shiwat, has proposed introducing the Jaintia alphabets to strengthen efforts to preserve the local language. The language that this proposal seeks to safeguard is Pnar, which is spoken by the Synteng, rather than the languages spoken by the War and the other non-Synteng groups living under the JHADC. This attempt to ignore the War identity is ironic because the language spoken by the Synteng, Pnar, began as a dialect of War.

When the Khasi first arrived in South Asia around 5,000 years ago, the language they spoke was similar to other Mon-Khmer languages, especially Palaung, which is spoken today in northern Myanmar by the Ta'ang (Palaung). Therefore, it is not the Sohra Khasi dialect but the War dialect spoken in Amlarem that bears closer similarities to the Mon-Khmer languages spoken elsewhere in Southeast Asia. This variety of Khasi emerged around 4,000 years ago. This is a very important date because the oldest archaeological sites known today—dating to around 3,000–4,000 years ago—are found in the Khasi Hills (Myrkhan) and Ri Bhoi (Lum Sohpetbneng), suggesting that the language spoken by the Khasis around 4,000 years ago would have sounded very similar to the War-Amwi dialect still spoken today in Amlarem.

Then, around 2,000 years ago, Lyngngam emerged as a distinct language within the Khasi group and is today spoken in West Khasi Hills and South West Khasi Hills. Around 1,300 years ago, Pnar emerged as a distinct language from War. Originally beginning as a dialect, it became the common language of those living on the tableland, while War continued to be spoken along the southern slopes. Then, around 700 years ago, the Sohra dialect began to take shape. The War are therefore the oldest Khasi group, and the Synteng are a branch of the War, not the other way around.

But who actually are the War? The term is used for those who live along the southern slopes and are known for their arecanut and Khasi mandarin orchards. In fact, the 1835 Pemberton's Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India remarked that the whole of Bengal was supplied with oranges from the War areas. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the War, however, is that they pioneered the construction of living root bridges, which are created by guiding the aerial roots of the diengjri (Ficus elastica) across rivers using temporary scaffolding. These aerial roots are known as jyrmi, which is connected to the earliest version of the myth of the Golden Bridge between heaven and earth.

An earlier version of the myth is found in the book 'Jaintia Folklore, Legends, and the History of the Khasi Religion' by Mrs. John Roberts. It states that a creeper, or jrymi, originally connected heaven and earth. However, when it was accidentally hacked by a farmer, heaven and earth began to drift apart.

Later, this myth, which originated in the War areas, was carried to Lum Sohpetbneng by people who likely spoke a language closer to the War-Amwi dialect. Today, the story continues to be revered through rituals performed by the Niam Khasi, with people from the Jaintia Hills also making the annual pilgrimage to pay their obeisance. Thus, the myth of the Golden Bridge and the story of the celestial families who came down to earth to farm are actually thousands of years old and could possibly be among the original stories that arrived from South China. When the story arrived here, new versions developed, but its core theme—the connection between heaven and earth—persisted, which is indeed remarkable. This would make it older than any of the stories found in the Rig Veda, making Khasi religion much older than Vedic Hinduism and among the oldest religious traditions in South Asia. And it is the War who have preserved that legacy, and it has continued as the Khasi community grew in numbers and linguistic diversity.

The War are the oldest Khasi group. They speak the oldest variety of the Khasi language and have preserved what is likely the oldest version of the Golden Bridge myth. There is a need to acknowledge their distinct identity within the Khasi people and to avoid subsuming them under labels such as "War-Jaintia" or imposing the Pnar alphabet on them. Such attempts should be resisted, just as U Woh Tep Khydiat resisted the imposition of a foreign religion, Hinduism, on the Khasis. Only then can the War's unique historical and cultural heritage be safeguarded, and their contributions to Khasi history and society be accorded the recognition they deserve.

(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)

How Students' Uprising is Reopening India's Socio-political Faultlines: A Perspective

By Antriksh Kar Singh

India witnessed history on the morning of July 20, when thousands of youngsters took to the streets to march towards Parliament - a spectacle no fellow Indian wanted to miss, whether they were present in the capital city or not. The march from Jantar Mantar to the Indian Parliament was part of a three-week-long peaceful hunger strike seeking accountability from the Union Government over the NEET examination paper leak. The peaceful march, however, turned aggressive and violent as Delhi police tried to block their path towards Parliament using several preventive measures, including barricades, water cannons, and tear gas, ultimately resulting in police resorting to a lathi charge on protestors. The young protestors didn't leave their ground, however, and continued their march, putting security forces on their toes and forcing them to temporarily lock down the Parliament campus by afternoon.

The protest was a kind of "nightmare" for the current dispensation, pressurising to a level that by evening a senior minister met Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) members leading the protest. However, the march, following the three-week hunger strike, also brought back India's socio-political faultlines into social media reflections. Opinions, perspectives, and voices were sharply divided over the protest and the march that followed.

On one side, supporters of the current dispensation amplified and propagated narratives suggesting foreign linkage to the protest in an attempt to label it anti-Indian, circulated a clip of comedian Kunal Kamra making a political satire to paint the movement as anti-Hindu, and also alleged that it was an opposition-sponsored protest. This playbook is not new to the Indian political sphere, which has seen similar attempts to label protestors and those demanding accountability from the government as anti-Indian, anti-Hindu, playing politics, or being opposition-sponsored. The most recent application of this playbook was witnessed during the farm law protests. What is more concerning, though, is that some mainstream television journalists appeared to side with the government, posting near-identical messages that absolved the government and its agencies, including the Delhi Police, of any accountability during the protest and also on the day of the march.

The other side comprises Indians concerned about the exam paper leak and the subsequent deaths of students reportedly linked to it, who are seeking accountability and reform of the system. These citizens have consistently shown solidarity, either by joining the protest in Delhi physically or by amplifying its message on social media. Students and young people across India organised gatherings in support of those marching towards Parliament, protesting the dysfunction of the examination system and other problems plaguing Indian education. These supporters hailed the protestors for reigniting belief in a fearless Indian democracy, where citizens are willing to hold the government accountable through peaceful protest, hunger strikes, and other democratic means.

The other side's defenders, meanwhile, have their own logic for supporting the current regime and opposing the protest: that previous governments oversaw more exam leaks and corruption than the current one, and that despite its flaws, the present regime is a "nationalist" one. That reasoning is questionable as nationalism is not a metric that lends itself to being measured, let alone be used for excusing policy failures; yet supporters remain supporters, however tenuous the logic. The protest also provided a glimpse into political faultlines marred with debate surrounding a weak opposition. Even though the CJP-led student protest drew support from renowned climate activist and educationist Sonam Wangchuk, who sat on an indefinite hunger strike, opposition leaders largely stayed on the sidelines until last week. It was only after the protest gathered online momentum, which was spurred through widely circulated images of a visibly weakened Wangchuk that a few opposition leaders began visiting the protest site. Many announced their support, but the Monday morning march was largely faceless, with no political leader taking charge in the absence of Wangchuk, who had reportedly been removed from the site and admitted to hospital by the Delhi Police on 18 July.

A few smaller parties including the Samajwadi Party, the Aam Aadmi Party, the Azad Party, the Rashtriya Loktantrik Party along with several activists, supported the march, but the principal opposition party maintained an unusual silence. Several Congress leaders, including party president Mallikarjun Kharge, Priyanka Gandhi, and Pawan Khera, did raise questions over police action on marching students that reportedly injured several of them, but the party did not endorse the protest outright. This may be done owing to some political calculations, or suspicion over the intentions of CJP's core members given their past affiliations with the AAP, which is an arch rival of the Congress in several states.

Whatever the reason, as the Congress is already raising the NEET issue through its own "Chhatra Gunj" programme, open support for the CJP march would likely have amplified the message and increased pressure on the government to act. Congress appears to have missed that opportunity, further exposing the faultlines of trust within the opposition.

The Government, too, missed a chance to resolve the protest peacefully through talks and negotiation. The protestors were demanding the resignation of the Union Education Minister and reform of the exam system; when the Government failed to respond, they called for the march to Parliament to build up pressure. Instead, the government relied on the Delhi Police to remove Wangchuk from the protest site and admit him to hospital, reportedly citing a Delhi High Court order that did not, in fact, support that action, a move that only reignited a protest that had begun to lose momentum. The Government could instead have engaged with the protestors and committed itself to reforming the examination system which might have de-escalated the situation. The engagement, though, did not materialise before the march thereby highlighting the shrinking space for peaceful protest in Indian democracy.

There were other issues that came to the limelight through the handling of the protest march. On July 20, as digital platforms circulated footage showing Delhi Police personnel resorting to a lathi charge, the force dismissed the clips as "rumours" through its official social media channels. Several protestors and journalists were reportedly detained that day, which police denied. This conduct by a security agency operating under the Union Government is difficult to reconcile with the standards expected of an ethical democracy. In the past three to four months alone, numerous corruption issues have surfaced across the country without the government fixing accountability, a basic requirement for democracy to function smoothly.

India appears to be moving through a distinct phase of democratic strain, in which nearly every issue gets filtered through the same lens- Hindu-Muslim framing, foreign interference, anti-national conspiracy, opposition backing, or "unnecessary politics." Those in power, and their supporters, seem to have forgotten that a protest site is inherently a space of political contestation, and that room for contesting ideas is a healthy feature of a diverse and plural democracy. Even within the CJP-led protest, there may well be politically motivated individuals, groups, and organisations involved, but the movement's growth in scale is followed by the Government's failure to respond properly, promptly, and appropriately.

(The author is a third-year PhD research scholar working in the department of journalism and mass communication, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya, India).

Letters to the Editor

Global Economy Downturn

Editor,

As the excitement of the World Cup fades, we must confront the severe economic challenges directly ahead. This is not doomsday fear mongering; it is an analysis grounded in hard economic reality. What strikes the global economy inevitably hits us domestically.

The government has long painted a rosy picture of "Bharat ke acche din," bragging about a $5 trillion economy. Yet, in May 2026, citizens were urged to curb foreign exchange spending—to stop buying gold, skip foreign trips, and cut petrol usage. The reality is that our economy is deteriorating under three major consecutive shocks.

First, on August 27, 2025, the US President imposed 50% tariffs on Indian goods. US exports collapsed, driving domestic industrial units to the brink of shutdown. Over the past six months, foreign investors have pulled out ₹2.7 trillion from Indian markets, making India the worst performer among developing economies.

Second, the US directed India to halt Russian oil purchases. Compounding this, a third shock struck on February 28, 2026: the Iran war. Joint US-Israel strikes plunged the Gulf into chaos (My column 'A New World Order?', March 24, 2026). Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz— vital shipping route for global oil—caused crude oil prices to surge by 58% between February and April. With Russian imports stopped and Middle Eastern supply dropping down 40%, India suffered the heaviest loss.

Under these shocks, the economy is crumbling. The Indian Rupee has become Asia's worst-performing currency in 2026 (96.90/$). This depreciation reflects a widening fiscal deficit—where spending vastly exceeds tax revenues. We face a potential fiscal cliff capable of triggering a recession far worse than the Great Depression of 1929.

The dream run of Modi Sarkar is over, with his inflated ego becoming a deflated balloon. With the CJP protests gaining momentum, he and his Adanis, Ambanis may have to take a flight.

In May 2026, banker Uday Kotak warned the nation to prepare for the worst, cautioning that unprecedented distress lies ahead. We must wake up from our slumber; mental and emotional preparation is now of utmost importance.

Yours etc.,
A.Laitphlang,
Via email

Frequent Music Parties Affecting Students

Editor,

With due respect, I wish to draw urgent attention to the persistent problem of loud music and bursting of firecrackers at the Hindu Mission premises in Lower Mawprem, Shillong–2. As a concerned father of school and college-going students, I am deeply worried about the disturbance caused to the academic environment and the peace of the neighbourhood. Since July 20 there has been, by and large, almost non-stop music from these premises. Sometimes, the residents are frightened and awakened in the middle of the night with high-decibel firecrackers.

It may be mentioned that this Mission frequently rents out its premises for marriage functions and various kinds of parties, often every third or fourth day, where high-volume music deeply disturbs the studies of students.

This regular sound pollution has severely affected students preparing for MBOSE, CBSE, and ICSE examinations, as well as those pursuing higher studies and competitive exams. Two students living near my residence, who are preparing for competitive examinations, have repeatedly complained of being distracted by the constant noise from these events.

In light of the above, I sincerely appeal to the police department and the Deputy Commissioner, East Khasi Hills for strict prohibitory orders on such party events at the Hindu Mission premises unless the organisers obtain prior No Objection Certificates (NOCs) from every single resident around this neighbourhood.

This measure would safeguard the interests of students, elderly people, and the wider community.

Furthermore, during Durga Puja, against the values of Hinduism, the organisation conducts unethical dances and music programmes that cause deep disturbance to nearby residents.

I sincerely hope the authorities will take note of this matter and act in the interest of public peace and students' welfare.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request
Via email

Public Cooperation and Strict Enforcement of Meghalaya Municipal Act 1973

Editor,

Through your esteemed daily, I would like to begin by appreciating the Shillong Municipal Board for its sincere efforts in maintaining cleanliness in our town. The sanitation staff work tirelessly to keep our roads and public places clean, and their work deserves public recognition.

However, despite the provisions of the Meghalaya Municipal Act, 1973, we are seeing continued littering by the public and rampant random parking, often directly over covered drains and footpaths. Garbage dumped into drains is choking drainage, leading to waterlogging, foul smell, and health hazards during monsoon.

As per the Meghalaya Municipal Act, Section 202 provides for penalty for neglect in keeping drains and trash receptacles for offensive matter in proper order. The offender "shall be liable to a penalty during which the offence is continued". Section 211 mandates the Board to provide for the removal of rubbish from public roads and drains. Obstructing this work also invites action. In addition, dumping of waste in public places is also being booked under Section 102 of Meghalaya Police Act, 2010, with fine. The District Administration has also issued orders banning littering in Shillong with penal action under Section 223 of Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita.

I therefore appeal to citizens to dispose garbage only in Municipal arranged vehicle and not in drains or open spaces, Avoid parking over drains, footpaths and in no-parking zone, Cooperate with the Municipal Board to keep our city clean.

If we all work together with sincerity to keep our city clean and green, the message on the roadside banners - "Keep City Clean and Green" - will truly come to life. At the same time, I request the Shillong Municipal Board to undertake regular awareness drives and enforce the penalty clauses of the Act strictly so that the law serves as a deterrent. A clean and orderly Shillong is possible only with joint effort by the Board and the public.

Yours etc.,
Krishnendu Deb,
Shillong-1.

Wanted a Nuanced Demographic Policy

Editor,

The Supreme Court is justified in asking the logic of the laws that disqualify people with more than two children from contesting local body elections. The national fertility rate has dropped to 1.9 which is below the replacement level of 2.1. The statistical report of 2024 gives concrete evidence of India's demographic shift. The demographic change is uneven in different states. While Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh etc. show fertility rate above the replacement level, Delhi, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal show very low fertility rate. This transition has far-reaching consequences. It is ironic that when the country is facing declining populations, its citizens are punished for having a big family. Low birth rate means in future, the elderly population will grow disproportionately to the working age population. The latter cannot continue for an indefinite time. This will adversely affect economic growth. Some states will have to face an ageing population, labour shortage etc. while some others will have to invest in the well-being of the youth. Instead of strict population control laws what we need now is region based demographic policies.

Yours etc.,
Venu GS,
Kollam

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

"Accomplishing something provides the only real satisfaction in life."

— Steven Pressfield

The Shillong Times

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Arrogance of power

NO mean comment ever had the power to unleash a storm as is now hitting the power edifices hard in the national capital. The snowballing protests against the NEET fiasco and arrogance of power as exemplified in Chief Justice Surya Kant's labelling of the ever-swelling army of disgruntled unemployed youths as cockroaches are collectively sending a chill down the spines of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his team of ministers. While the angry youths seek the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, the movement set in motion by the newly formed Cockroach Janata Party has, after a few weeks' gestation period, turned out to be a nightmare for the sleepy, corrupt establishment. The start of the Monsoon Session of Parliament at this precise juncture has come as a godsend for the movement that seeks restoration of sanctity in the government-conducted examinations that were repeatedly hijacked right under the nose of the Modi government, exposing its ineptitude.

An offer by the besieged Modi in Parliament on Thursday to set up fast-track courts to deal with question paper leaks is ludicrous. His government's job, rather, is to ensure avoidance of such leaks altogether. Modi has, over the years, acquired a poor reputation for skirting issues by introducing extraneous factors into discussions in Parliament either to hide his ineptitude or to skilfully deflect attention from the central theme. The call to him was to clean up the Augean stables by removing the education minister and effecting system corrections to avoid future paper leaks. He is not ready for both. But what awaits him outside is perhaps a tempest, considering the present mood of the miffed students. The crowds outside swear they are ready to face the brute power of Amit Shah's police as reinforcements of security forces in the national capital from other states are currently under way. Delhi remains paralysed in large parts with Metro Stations closed and bus services suspended to blunt the edge of protests. That Bollywood actors and activists like Arundhati Roy have come out in support of the students in the aftermath of detention of Sonam Wangchuk, now on the 26th day of his fast, adds a new weight to the snowballing protests.

It is a sign of the times and a sad commentary on the state of the justice dispensation system that chief justice Surya Kant took upon himself the task of handling a petition on Wednesday about police excesses filed by the Cockroach Janata Party, his own baby. Dignity, if a speck of it is still left, demanded that he shifted the case to some other learned judge and kept his own mouth shut. Kant's latest rantings drew rebuke from the Congress and further brought down the dignity of the apex court. His boisterous talks only demonstrated the arrogance of power and the loosening of judicial dignity. The people who sweat it out to feed the exchequer and fill the stomachs and cash chests of those in authority deserve a fair deal from them. Modi's failure to keep systems in proper shape, including that of the judiciary, has come back to haunt him now in the form of the CJP.

Relentless Cycle of Poverty: Who Will Halt this Wretchedness

By Patricia Mukhim

Shillong is a comfort zone and makes us look at the world around us through rose-tinted glasses. Unfortunately, too many don't step beyond these comfort zones and believe all is right with the world. The MLAs we elect don't know what poverty is because they have not walked even a mile in a poor man/woman's feet (not shoes mind you, most cannot afford even a pair of slippers). Thankfully these days one can get a nice pair of chappals for Rs 199 from Vishal's but even that amount is scarce if you live in a village and are growing cabbages that sell at Rs 2 a kilogram and you have 5, 6 or 7 mouths to feed. And then you are all the time debating whether to continue to send your kids to school or pull out the 10, 11 and 12 year olds so they can shepherd the sheep and cows and earn something for the family. Parents in the rural outback believe schooling is a leisure their children cannot afford. It takes money to put them through school but the returns are abysmal. As far as the parents are concerned education is simply a means to an end – the end being a job. The larger role of education is lost on them because poverty is a tough road to walk on.

In Meghalaya we have one tragedy after another. The tragedy of July 10 at Lapalang that killed 5 people was hardly mourned when 3 other young boys died because they accidentally stepped on a live wire. Then a young boy takes his own life after writing down the reasons why he did so. So yes, the tragedies have become part of our lives. We hear of them on YouTube, read about them in newspapers and move on because our collective consciences are dead. I sometimes wonder what is preached in the churches? Do priests and pastors speak about empathy (sngewlem meaning you feel the pain of those who suffer and wonder what you can do to help) not sympathy (sngewsynei meaning you feel sorry and move on)?

One negative impact of religion is to preach that every child born in this world is a gift from God. Sorry, but indiscriminate sex between a man and woman resulting in an unwanted pregnancy cannot be attributed to God. It's time to get real and teach sexual and reproductive rights to children at Class 5-6 because girls menstruate by then.

One reason why I detest articles that regurgitate like a stomach afflicted by reflux and dwell on past glories of this 'jaidbynriew' and how everything then was hunky dory and also certain academics who have nothing better to do than wax eloquent about their tribe and sub-tribes as though such paeans add to our economy. The same academics skirt the ugly topics of poverty, school-drops, poor habitation that barely keeps out the rain and wind and the hand-to-mouth existences of too many in our villages. Well, these academics have had the best of education; they teach in elite institutions and are therefore rain-proofed, wind-proofed, and emotion-proofed from issues that afflict those very same folks that these writers romanticize about on their laptops sitting in a comfort zone. Some of these academics earn a UGC scale that pays them Rs 4.5 lakh per month. It provokes me to ask: What actually are you educating the young ones? Is it only to follow your footsteps, live in a cocoon and get into the groove of teaching a future bunch of kids who pass out with flying colours without ever understanding the meaning of empathy? Without empathy you can drive across Meghalaya's rustic hills and valleys with the scenery broken by dilapidated homes with two rooms where a family of 5-6 people live and feel totally unmoved. So yes, people travel to Nongjrong, Syntung, Mawkynrew, or West Khasi Hills without taking in the utter deprivation of people in these areas that makes their lives a cycle of suffering.

Fifty years ago Meghalaya needed a development model that takes into account its natural resources and its fragile environment. The state should have also taken stock of the so-called "traditional institutions" and enquired into their ability to promote equity in terms of responsible management of community lands. Failure to take stock of these institutions and how they actually manage the so-called community resources is one reason why poverty has grown by leaps and bounds. Many farmers in Thangsning and elsewhere are farming on lease-held land. The question is: How did some families get to own so much land and others nothing? Where is that tribal norm of equitable sharing of land at least for a homestead? Why should a few clans, most of them residents of Shillong, hold ownership over so much land – far beyond what they can use while others who till that very soil are landless? Why did the Khasi-Jaintia society not design a land ceiling beyond which a single family or clan cannot own land? Why have these norms that guided our ancestors been trampled under our feet? That's why it's laughable when people assert that Khasi society is "egalitarian." Egalitarian my foot!

And just take a hard look at who is exploiting the natural resources – forests, coal, limestone, boulders! Aren't all these resources meant to be community-owned? So how did the community sign away its rights over these resources and allow only a few rich families to benefit from them? Are our village elders (Rangbah Shnong/Sordar Shnong) committed towards the welfare of their people or more interested in signing away their rights over community land especially in a situation where land is alienated for road construction, for coal and limestone mining and for extracting boulders and mining sand from our rivers?

The problem with the Khasi-Jaintia society today is that the "community" is just a word with no meaning because there is no single community. There is the community of the rich, land-owning elite and the very poor who also make up a community of their own. The gap between these two will never meet. So, when the Government conceives of schemes which it claims are community-led it has to explain which community it is representing – the rich and landed tribal elite or the poor, voiceless community that has no rights at all. That community has no access to health care, to basic nutrition and least of all education. Sadly, the Government seems to be taking the path of least resistance and empowering those already well-heeled members of the community who are close to politicians and know the language of patronage. After all what is practiced here as elsewhere is patronage democracy. If I know the MLA and was at the forefront in campaigning for him I get more rights than those who quietly voted without becoming volunteers shouting slogans and singing songs composed to brainwash simple folks.

In all of this melee enters the District Council whose brief is to protect and conserve not just the customary laws and practices but also to protect the natural resources because they don't belong to any single entity but to the people. The District Councils have failed miserably by not even keeping track of the number of stone and sand quarries that have come up in the Khasi Hills alone. Look at the endless quarrying activity along the road to Mawrah and Kongthong or the road to Pashang and Syntung. Does construction in Meghalaya need so much boulder and sand extraction? How much is too much? When Climate Change hits, the Government will come up with standard phrases such as, "Climate Resilient Development" and all those high sounding phrases even while our environment is being bulldozed moment by moment. Yes, some people are getting rich and they already have alternative homes abroad but what about the "Community" that is destined to live and die here? How many families are benefitting from these extractions? Is wealth evenly distributed?

The task before this Government is to take poverty alleviation as an imperative for the next 5-10 years and get development specialists to articulate a road map for poverty alleviation and to get to work on this with the seriousness it deserves. People sitting in the Secretariat and District Offices should know what it feels like when someone is ill and health care is not accessible or too expensive to access. There has to be a special push for getting all children back to school no matter what it takes. Government has to wrack its brains on how to create millions of sustainable livelihoods that allow people to earn without destroying the natural resources on which Meghalaya depends? That would require a shift from a welfare-dependent economy to one based on productive agriculture, agro-processing, local enterprise, skills, better schools, health, connectivity, responsible tourism and accountable governance. Let's remember that extraction of natural resources has only enriched a few families and not bow down to groups that demand reopening of coal mines without taking responsibility for reclaiming abandoned mines and cleaning up the Lukha and Lunar Rivers. Why should all of us suffer for the insatiable greed of a few? Yes coal, limestone, forests and other resources have generated wealth for a few "high level" among the community but what about the rest of us? Unless the Government thinks of alternative livelihoods, the resource extraction economy can become a poverty trap leaving behind more and more poor people who will one day take up arms against what they see as a predatory state.

At the Heart of a P.T.M

By Kyntiewborlang Kharakakor

I've had sleepless nights over the past few weeks for a number of reasons. My beloved G.O.A.T. had to go home early - unwillingly, as his teammates—especially the so-called "World's Best Midfielders"—were apparently feeling homesick. My only consolation then was to shift all my hopes to Dictator Mbappe. But that too was squashed by Columbus' descendants as they sailed their Santa Maria into the Finals of the FIFA World Cup and conquered the game. But that's not the only reason why I've been up late. It's Mid Term season, and on my desk stood what seems to be a veritable Tower of Babel waiting to be assessed and graded– not because the answers are gibberish but each paper speaks in its own unique voice. To add to this Apot Sep Sngi (great misfortune), Mr. Edu Dept dropped by and left us teachers with yet another homework assignment—A Simple Guidebook – P.T.M Guidelines. In the wee hours of the 16th, I let out a cry of happiness and satisfaction—No! not because of Messi's brilliant assist, but because I had finally completed the last P.T.M. Improvement Plan Questionnaire for my girls— all 57 of them. To even write one is a challenge in itself. But perhaps the Hand of God— Maradona's, not Michelangelo's —decided to assist this weary English teacher.

"The heart of the P.T.M Day"

The PTM Guidelines for Teachers (PTM - a Simple Guidebook) is a part of the Meghalaya Project for Adolescent Wellbeing, Empowerment & Resilience. It outlines a simple and practical framework for teachers to conduct Parent Teacher Meetings - from welcoming parents, to having a fruitful one-to-one talk and finally to chart a concise improvement plan for the child's progress. According to it, the meeting should aim to answer these three simple questions - What is the child doing well? What help does the child need? and What can parents & teachers do together? It also gives suggestions on preparation for the day for both parents and teachers alike. A two paged Parent Teacher Meeting Consent Form (Iron and Folic Acid Supplement, Deworming tabs and APAAR ID creation) and Student Support Note is given to school authorities.

What is the child doing well? What help does the child need?

It would be a great injustice if a child's progress is measured simply by grades/marks, for a traditional PTM as understood by most parents is centred on that. Every red mark on the child's answer script fuels parental frustration. Then comes the usual refrain – "she's always on the phone", "she's very careless". A child's growth often reveals itself in the smallest of moments. Out of the blue, a Class 2 girl stepped forward in class untied her shoelaces and tied it again, reciting a rhyme as she loops the thread. She wanted the teacher to notice her achieving a small milestone and proudly showed her fine motor-skills.

Classroom interactions, classwork, participation, behaviour, and countless small moments often reveal far more than an examination script ever can. At times Sherlock's observation skill is needed, especially with young adolescent girls, to see what they are quietly accomplishing beneath the surface. But when a classroom holds 57 unique jewels, even Sherlock Holmes would struggle to keep track of them all. Observation alone is not enough for teenagers. They don't display their strengths, struggles and aspirations openly and we cannot infer everything from their behaviour. Beneath a smile they hide a mountain of academic and often emotional burdens. We have to create a safe space and give them opportunities to articulate their own strengths and needs. By doing so, the focus shifts from "What do parents and teachers think about the child and the help she needs?" to "How does this child think of herself?". The child is no longer a passive vessel to be filled but an active participant whose voice deserves to be heard.

At times we have to listen with wisdom, rather than observe like Sherlock. The guidebook's philosophy was put to the test in the class. Instead of asking out rightly what they are doing well/good at or where they needed help, those very questions are woven as normal classroom dialogue. With a pen and a slip of paper, they quietly revealed their strengths, struggles, aspirations and worries. No amount of observation could unearth such precious revelations. This exercise also becomes a satisfying release for the children. Now, the Improvement Plan can be tailored as per the requirement of each child.

What Teachers can do

A child scored very less in English - commits a lot of grammatical and spelling errors. She finds that Maths equations/problems are like the intertwined wires on Laitumkhrah's street. Instead of blaming the child for not studying or for often getting carried away with the tea brewing on the next bench during class lessons, teachers should also reflect on themselves. At times we asked ourselves why the child is not learning, but the real issue is why isn't the child understanding. Maybe the language was too high during explanation...or her understanding of the foundational concepts were not that strong. We have to step in and channel the "Youtube Indian Guy" from within us and simplify concepts to a point where students can easily sip with a straw. Some are afraid to approach and seek help fearing judgement from peers. This manifests in stress before exams. Teachers have to become trusted confidants, assuring the child that asking for help is never a sign of weakness and their struggles can remain between them. Coordination between professional counsellors and teachers in school is a must to tackle emotional and mental challenges that a child encounters in her learning experience.

What parents can do

It is never 50-50. A child is not a prized commodity or a contract. Teachers give their 100 percent in school and parents should also do the same at home. The welfare of the child is our No.1 priority. Additional support, all round, is required from the parents' side in order to enrich a child's learning experience. A child's development is much like Spain's World Cup Win, not the result of individual brilliance alone, but of countless well-coordinated passes between teammates. Parents and teachers must become those teammates, chasing one goal at a time.

Give credit where credit is due

For years and decades, teachers have always held meaningful PTMs, even before the guidebook came into existence. Credit, however, should be given to the minds behind this initiative. By providing a clear framework, the guidebook keeps the conversation centred on the child rather than allowing it to drift into something unproductive. In some cases, from the moment kwai is offered by the mother, a PTM without a clear framework can often wander into every imaginable topic—except the child. Conversations are dominated by marks, complaints, comparisons with classmates or disciplinary issues. This overshadows the serious questions: What is the child doing well? What help does the child need? and What can parents & teachers do together?

A small note to Mr. Edu Dept: Thank you for the thoughtful gift. Next time, could Santa Claus make the delivery before the school year starts instead of halfway through the script-correction season?

Letters to the Editor

Equal relief for five bereaved families

Editor,

I write this after reading Salil Gewali's touching letter, "Lapalang tragedy: a story of bravery and loss" published in the Shillong Times on 21st July. I urge the Government of Meghalaya to provide prompt and equal financial support to the families of all five victims without discrimination.

The rescuers Sunil and Umesh Thakuri, who belonged to the same family, also died in the toxic gas leak. They were not part of the workplace but were neighbours who rushed in to save the three labourers purely on humanitarian grounds. Their courage deserves the highest appreciation from all of us.

The three labourers lost their lives because they were compelled to work in risky conditions to feed their families in the face of unemployment, which is ultimately the responsibility of the government. The authorities must ensure that full financial support is released quickly and interim relief is provided to meet immediate needs. Each bereaved family should also be given employment opportunities on humanitarian grounds.

I fully agree with Gewali's view that senior journalist Patricia Mukhim always speaks out whenever humanitarian emergencies arise. Influential people are often too busy to extend such selfless support, and my deep respect goes to Kong Patricia for her compassion.

Yours etc.,
H. Umdor,
Shillong -8

Traffic Congestion in the Fire Brigade Area

Editor,

Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, I would like to draw the attention of the concerned authorities to the increasing traffic congestion in the Fire Brigade area of Shillong.

One of the main causes of the traffic jam, especially for vehicles coming from the Nongthymmai side, is the queue of vehicles waiting to enter the petrol pump. Many vehicles are allowed to park or wait along the roadside near the petrol pump until their turn comes to refuel. This significantly narrows the road and obstructs the smooth flow of traffic.

Another major cause is vehicles coming from the Laitumkhrah side making a right turn into the petrol pump. These vehicles often stop in the middle of the road while waiting for a gap in the oncoming traffic, resulting in long queues and severe congestion during peak hours.

I sincerely request the Traffic Police and the concerned authorities to take appropriate measures, such as regulating vehicle queues at the petrol pump, restricting roadside waiting, and improving traffic management at this junction. These steps would greatly help reduce congestion and ensure smoother traffic movement for all commuters.

I hope the concerned authorities will take prompt action in the interest of the public.

Yours etc.,
James M Laloo
Shillong -14

Formalities Regarding the EWS Certificate

Editor,

I am writing regarding the procedure for obtaining an EWS certificate issued by the DC's Office, Shillong, which can be applied for online.

While submitting the online application, applicants are required to upload various documents, including mark sheets from nursery to the highest qualification obtained, the birth certificate, affidavits, the headman's certificate, and other relevant documents.

After submitting the online application, applicants must undergo police verification, during which police personnel visit the applicant's residence, verify the documents, and conduct an interview. Applicants are also required to submit hard copies of all the documents at this stage.

Thereafter, applicants must attend an interview with the concerned officer at the DC's Office, where they are again required to submit photocopies of the same documents. The entire process is time-consuming and takes many months to obtain the certificate.

I would like to offer the following suggestions:

For the renewal of an EWS certificate, applicants should not be required to submit the same detailed documents repeatedly. A minimal list of essential documents should be prescribed for renewals.

The process of issuing the certificate should be completed within a shorter time frame. If necessary, additional staff may be engaged to ensure timely delivery of certificates.

The documents uploaded during the online application process should be made accessible to the Police Department and the concerned officer conducting the interview. This would eliminate the need for repeated submission of hard copies, reduce paper consumption, and contribute to environmental conservation.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request
Via email

Supreme Court Says Using Vulgar Language Not Obscene

Editor,

It is an accepted fact that words uttered in anger are seldom elegant and such words may be rude, offensive, and even shocking but there is a vital distinction between what is merely vulgar and what is legally obscene. By drawing that distinction with clarity, the Supreme Court has performed an important service to both free speech and the criminal justice system. The use of swear words, profanities, and vulgar expletives is certainly not a mark of civility.

Such language is distasteful and has no place in courteous public discourse. However, human beings are not always calm or rational. Heated arguments often produce words that would never have been spoken after reflection. The law has long recognised this difference between impulsive conduct and deliberate wrongdoing. A murder committed in a sudden fit of rage attracts a different degree of culpability from one that is meticulously planned. The same principle should inform the criminalisation of speech.

It is in this context that the apex court's recent judgement assumes significance. A bench headed by Justice Sanjay Karol interpreted Section 294 (b) of the Indian Penal Code and its corresponding provision in the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, which deals with obscene acts and utterances.

The case arose from a land dispute in Tamil Nadu in which one party repeatedly hurled a notorious four-letter abuse at another during a quarrel in 2017. The court rightly held that merely using foul language does not automatically amount to obscenity. Quoting from the dictionary it reiterated that obscenity must satisfy the "community standards test".

The expression must be lascivious, appeal to prurient interests, and have the tendency to deprave and corrupt those who hear or read it. It must also genuinely cause annoyance to others, said the court

In the said case the words used by the now 70-year-old accused were described, "at best, abusive or vulgar in nature," falling well short of the legal threshold of obscenity. The ruling is consistent with earlier judicial pronouncements, recognising that obscenity is not a fixed concept. Standards of morality evolve with time and vary across societies. Customs, traditions, social background, and the setting in which words are spoken all influence whether something is obscene. The court has also consistently distinguished vulgarity from obscenity. Vulgarity may evoke disgust or revulsion, but obscenity is something that corrupts morals and appeals to prurient instincts.

The changing fortunes of Lady Chatterley's Lover illustrate how society's perceptions of obscenity evolve over time. The judgement should serve as a reminder to the police that criminal law is not a weapon for punishing every instance of bad manners. Offensive language deserves social disapproval, but only speech that crosses the carefully defined legal threshold should invite criminal prosecution. Such restraint is essential in a democracy that values both decency and freedom of expression.

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*

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"Disobedience is the true foundation of liberty."

— Henry David Thoreau

The Shillong Times

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People Power Prevails

AT no point in history other than the India Independence Movement has a protest that started at Delhi's Jantar Mantar managed to reach every corner of this country. Although it took some time to arrive in the North Eastern states of Meghalaya, Mizoram and even Arunachal Pradesh a BJP-ruled state, it did take off. Manipur is facing its own set of internal crises; hence, a united protest even on a matter as crucial as the leak of the NEET question papers, the subsequent student suicides, and the bungling over the CBSE paper corrections, has been subsumed under their own ethnic fights and assertions. Tripura and Assam both BJP-ruled states have also not risen to the occasion. It is amusing to note just how tightly controlled the BJP-ruled states are. Delhi is a good example of a central Government unleashing violence on the peaceful protesters at Jantar Mantar. In Nagaland too there is a stunning silence!

In Meghalaya there were protests at two different sites on July 23: one at Police Point and the other at Police Bazar. It's ironic how both places are prefixed by the word "Police," and yet there was no intimidating police presence near the crowd. At Police Point several kids were holding placards with all the seriousness at their command. This is how democracy should be. Police are meant to tackle adverse elements not peaceful protestors but that is what the Delhi Police have been told to do – to prevent peaceful protestors from reaching Sansad Marg the heart of India's democracy. The BJP Government has tried since assuming office to pulverize people's voices and prevent any public movement. The Farmers' Protest was crushed through the use of force. Much of what happened was disseminated to the people of this country and the globe not by the mainstream media but by journalists who are struggling to make ends meet but have stuck to their principles. India continues to experience some semblance of democracy because of such journalists, many of whom were arrested while on duty and spent jail time. Never before has this country suffered such a depletion of rights.

After seeing the spontaneous public response to the call of the Cockroach Janta Party and the massive gatherings that have gathered momentum in every part of the country, the Prime Minister decided to give a speech over Instagram stating that the Government has responded by activating fast-track courts to deal with the crime and that the criminals involved in the NEET paper leak were in jail. This is not what the public demands. The public want the Education Minister to take personal responsibility for the NEET paper leak and its aftermath – the suicide of at least 20 students. The Modi Government is adamant in its stance that ministers cannot be held responsible for what happens under their watch which is a far cry from what happened under previous governments when a railway minister resigned after a train tragedy. These days ministers operate without accountability, thereby violating the basic tenets of democratic governance. Now the protestors are asking the Prime Minister to hold a press conference where he can be asked all uncomfortable questions. It is unheard of that a Prime Minister who is accountable to the people is unwilling to answer questions to the media. Instead, the Government has co-opted large sections of the media now referred to as Godi media to become its public relations machinery. This is the problem with India under the Modi-led NDA regime.

Sacred Rituals of the Jaintias: Where Faith, Tradition and Nature Meet

By Dr Omarlin Kyndiah

For the Jaintias, rituals were more than ceremonies-they were expressions of faith, gratitude, and the enduring relationship between human beings, the Creator, the ancestors, and nature. Whether preparing for the sowing of seeds, embarking on a hunt, or cleansing the village of evil, every important undertaking began with prayer and symbolic acts that sought harmony, protection, and divine guidance. These sacred traditions, passed down through generations, reflect the spiritual richness of Jaintia culture and the values that sustained community life.

Thoh Langdoh: Preparing the Earth for Life

Among the sacred rituals of the Jaintias, Thoh Langdoh holds a special place because it marks the ceremonial beginning of the agricultural season during the observance of Behdieñkhlam. While Behdieñkhlam is widely recognised as a festival to drive away plague, disease, and evil, it is equally a celebration deeply rooted in the agricultural life of the Pnar people.

Before anyone could plant cucumbers, pumpkins, beans, or other vegetables, the ritual of Thoh Langdoh had to be performed. The ceremony sought the blessings of the Creator for fertile soil, favourable weather, and a season of abundance. Only after this sacred rite were villagers permitted to begin planting their vegetable crops, signifying that cultivation should commence only after divine approval had been sought.

Beh Ser Soopeh: The Sacred Hunt

Before the hunters entered the forest, the village assembled at the sacred altar. Hunting was never regarded as a mere pursuit of food but as an undertaking that required divine guidance and respect for the natural world.

The priest offered prayers and carefully cracked an egg, reading its signs to seek the blessings of the Creator and the ancestors. From the sacred omen, he determined the direction in which the hunters should travel, believing that the spirits of the forest would reveal the safest and most fruitful path.

With spears in hand and blessings upon them, the hunters entered the forest. When the hunt was successful, the animal was brought back with reverence to the altar. There, prayers of thanksgiving were offered before its meat was shared among the entire community, reminding everyone that nature's gifts were never for one person alone but for all.

Cher Yung Blai: Driving Away Evil

When the time came to cleanse the village of misfortune and evil influences, the men gathered to perform the ancient rite known as Cher Yung Blai.

Together they built a small hut from bamboo and fresh grass on the outskirts of the village. The humble structure symbolically became the dwelling place into which all harmful spirits, sickness, and ill fortune were drawn.

Armed with spears, the men circled the hut while prayers were offered. At the appointed moment, they rushed forward and thrust their spears into the structure, symbolically destroying the forces of evil and driving them away from the community. As the ceremony ended, the villagers believed that peace had been restored, the village purified, and harmony renewed. The ritual served as a powerful reminder that the well-being of the community depended not only on physical strength but also on unity, faith, and the collective resolve to overcome darkness with courage.

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Ka Siang ka Pha: Honouring the Ancestors

Among the most revered sacred traditions of the Jaintias is Ka Siang ka Pha, also known as Ka Siang ka Phur, a ritual of ancestor veneration that marks the beginning of the annual Behdieñkhlam festival in Jowai. Celebrated on Ka Pynsiñ, the sixth day of the traditional eight-day Pnar week, the ceremony officially inaugurates the three-day and four-night festival.

The ritual begins with families and clans preparing offerings of food for their departed ancestors. More than a ceremonial feast, it is an expression of gratitude, respect, and remembrance for the forebears who laid the foundations of the clan and preserved its traditions. Through this act, the living reaffirm their bond with those who came before them.

According to the Jaintia belief in the afterlife, the souls of the departed dwell with the Creator, where they partake of betel nut in the courtyard of His abode. Once each year, during Behdieñkhlam, these ancestral spirits known as Ki Syngngia Ki Saret are believed to return briefly to the earthly realm to receive the offerings lovingly prepared by their descendants. The ritual serves to honour and propitiate the departed, while seeking their blessings for the well-being and prosperity of the family.

Ka Siang ka Pha is traditionally observed by every clan. However, families that have recently experienced a bereavement or are affected by serious illness do not perform the ceremony, as the offering to the deceased would already have been made during the funeral rites. This observance reflects the continuity of Jaintia beliefs concerning life, death, and the enduring relationship between the living, their ancestors, and the Creator.

More than a ritual of remembrance, Ka Siang ka Pha affirms one of the central tenets of Jaintia spirituality: that death does not sever the bond between generations. Instead, it strengthens the sacred continuity of family, tradition, and faith, reminding each generation that the ancestors remain an integral part of the community's spiritual life.

Conclusion

The four sacred practices discussed here-Thoh Langdoh, Beh Ser Soopen, Cher Yung Blai, and Ka Siang ka Pha represent only a small part of the rich and diverse spiritual traditions of the Jaintia people. Across generations, the Jaintias have preserved numerous rituals, ceremonies, and customary practices that reflect their deep relationship with the Creator, nature, the ancestors, and the community.

Together, these examples reveal a profound spiritual worldview in which religion is not separated from daily life but is woven into agriculture, hunting, social harmony, protection, and the relationship between the living and the departed. Thoh Langdoh reflects the sacred bond between the people and the land, reminding the community that cultivation begins with gratitude and divine blessing. Beh Ser Soopen expresses respect for nature and the belief that human beings must seek guidance before taking from the forest. Cher Yung Blai represents the collective effort to protect the village and restore balance by overcoming forces of misfortune. Ka Siang ka Pha preserves the eternal connection between generations by honouring the ancestors whose wisdom and traditions continue to guide their descendants.

Though different in purpose, these sacred practices share a common message: life must be lived in harmony with the Creator above, the earth beneath, the ancestors behind, and the community beside us. They embody values of gratitude, humility, responsibility, and respect for all forms of life.

These traditions are not merely ceremonies preserved from the past; they are living expressions of Jaintia identity, cultural reminiscence, and spiritual continuity. While the rituals presented here represent only a glimpse of the wider sacred heritage of the Jaintias, they provide an insight into the beliefs and values that have sustained the community through centuries of change. Preserving and understanding these practices is essential for appreciating the depth and richness of Jaintia civilisation.

No Country for Young Cockroaches

By Ellerine Diengdoh

India is a massive, pointy bit of land located just to the right of the middle of the world, and pinned to the bottom of Asia so it doesn't float away into the sea where the sharks are.

For those who don't know, it is also famous for inventing the 'zero'. It is ironic, really when you think about it, because 'zero' is also the exact number of exam papers that haven't been leaked so far.

In India; education, in theory, is treated like a sacred cow. But in reality it is treated like a cow that has accidentally wandered into a very expensive china shop and started eating all the ming vases.

I know this for a fact, because a few months ago, we were rudely awakened by something called the 'CJP movement'. The movement was not based on a grand theory, like gravity, or why we can't see behind our own ears without two mirrors. Curiously enough, it grew out of a very casual remark, a thoughtless crude dismissal of unemployed youths who have been told AGAIN that they are the problem.

Now I will explain to you why this was taken so very seriously by the youths of India.In most countries, people have hobbies like football, or origami, but in India, the national hobby is "studying." That is the only way out of crippling poverty here, and Indian parents are so dedicated to this hobby that they actually decide what their children will do for a living long before they are even born. While parents all over the world are wondering if their baby will have its mother's eyes, Indian parents are wondering if the fetus has enough mathematical aptitude to get into a top-tier engineering college.But despite all this seriousness, and all the hours spent shoving facts into their brains, they wake up one day to find out, that the exam wasn't actually about what was inside their heads at all, but about who is inside their dad's WhatsApp contact list. It is heartbreaking that we are told that the 'ladder of success' is there for everyone. But in reality, it turns out the ladder actually leads to an alternate heaven with a giant door, and that door only opens if you arrive with a letter of recommendation from a man wearing a gold watch. The CJP movement is unusual because it converted a personal grumble into a big public question. People are no longer asking "why did this leak happen?" but "why does this keep happening?".This is what experts call a 'serious democratic failure'.When leaking exam papers becomes as normal as breathing, the issue is no longer about books but about the health of the Republic. And right now, the Republic looks like it needs to lie down in a dark room with a damp flannel over its forehead and some Enya playing quietly,in the background.

The students, dignified as they are, are proudly calling themselves "Cockroaches". This is a very bold move, because usually, when you see a cockroach, you don't think, "There goes a future nuclear physicist", you think, "EEEEKKSSSS! GET ME A SHOE QUICKKKK!!!!!!!!". But they use the name given to them because, like a cockroach, they have to survive in the dark, eat literal rubbish, get screamed at and be ready to get crushed into the carpet at any moment.So, they took on the routine humiliation of being stepped on and turned it into a language everyone can understand, a language that is blunt and ridiculous.

But the government didn't like the jokes as we have seen. When people protested silently, the state reacted like a psycho dad who says he's "not angry, just disappointed", while simultaneously trying to hit you over and over with a broom.

Now the protesters are called "anti-national".It's a brilliant word, really. It means everything and nothing. If you say, "Excuse me, my exam paper is being sold out of the back of a van", they won't say "Oh, sorry about that", instead they scream "You are anti-national!" Turning a simple conversation about honesty into a conversation about flags, because it is much easier to wave a flag than it is to stop people from stealing.

So, if you can't march against corruption, and you can't ask why the "connected" kids get all the jobs, then what is 'democratic' about 'democracy'? Is it just a fancy word for picking which millionaire gets to wipe their feet on you for the next five years?

A country isn't strong because everyone pretends to be happy. That isn't a country, that is a cult! A country is strong when people are allowed to say "This is utter rubbish!" without being battered with a big stick for saying so.

If the people in charge keep trying to stamp on the cockroaches, they might find out something annoying about cockroaches.....: you can't shame a creature that lives in the cracks of a broken floor. The only thing that kills them is light, but accountability in India is DEAD! So, the real horror isn't cockroach infestation. The real horror is that the people in charge have let the nation rot so thoroughly, that the only thing left in the entire country with an actual, functioning spine is the vermin.

While parents all over the world are wondering if their baby will have its mother's eyes, Indian parents are wondering if the fetus has enough mathematical aptitude to get into a top-tier engineering college.But despite all this seriousness, and all the hours spent shoving facts into their brains, they wake up one day to find out, that the exam wasn't actually about what was inside their heads at all, but about who is inside their dad's WhatsApp contact list. It is heartbreaking that we are told that the 'ladder of success' is there for everyone.

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Letters to the Editor

Gen Z Speaks: Listen Before It's Too Late

Editor,

For the past one month, youth across the country have been demanding the resignation of the Education Minister, Dharmendra Pradhan, over the alleged NEET paper leak. This is not the first time such allegations have surfaced, but they have been raised on several occasions in the past. Abhijit Dipke, the founder of the Cockroach Janata Party (CJP), has been leading a movement of frustrated Gen Z youth demanding accountability from the government. As a symbolic form of protest, the youth even brought diapers! Not for babies, but for the government over the allegations that crucial medical examinations have been leaked repeatedly.

They have remained at the protest site for a long period and are not prepared to end their agitation unless the Education Minister resigns Why is the Prime Minister of India hesitant to ask the Education Minister to take responsibility? What is the hidden agenda? We have also seen that on July 20, 2026, the police allegedly beat the protesting youth mercilessly. Now, the movement is no longer confined to Delhi, it has spread to almost every state, including our own cities of Shillong and Tura. Not only that, reports and expressions of solidarity have also emerged from countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, Ireland, the Netherlands, and many others.

One thing I have observed from the Gen Z protests is that, despite their frustration, the youth have displayed remarkable creativity. The slogans they raise and the tactics they use have captured public attention. We can also see similar scenes unfolding in Bihar, where confrontations between the youth and the police have taken place. I wonder, where ll the media are? Why are they not giving adequate coverage to the protests at Jantar Mantar? Even when they do report on them, the focus often seems to be on portraying the youth as aggressive and rude rather than highlighting the issues they are raising.

Dear Government, if this movement is becoming widespread, why continue to provoke and escalate tensions? I believe that remaining silent in the face of perceived injustice is not an option. The youth are not demanding something impossible, they are asking for accountability and fairness in matters that directly affect their future. Please do not silence their voices. Instead, listen to them and invite them for a meaningful and peaceful dialogue. Ignoring them may only deepen public frustration. The government should engage with the concerns being raised before the situation deteriorates further and leads to more serious consequences,

Yours etc.,
Evanisha Pathaw
Via email

Don't Rewrite Jaintia History

Editor,

I write in response to Bhogtoram Mawroh's article, "The War People & The Making of Khasi Identity," published in The Shillong Times on 23 July 2026.

The War community deserves every recognition for its immense contribution to the history and culture of the Jaintia people. Their traditions, language and heritage should be preserved and celebrated. However, Mawroh's article does not stop at recognising the War. Instead, it questions the legitimacy of the Jaintia identity and presents speculation as established historical fact.

His criticism of the proposed Jaintia alphabet is particularly misleading. He suggests that it is an attempt to impose Pnar on the War people. This is simply incorrect. The Alphabet Committee constituted by the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council did not ignore the War dialects. The Committee carefully studied the phonetic features of the War language and introduced additional letters to represent sounds not found in standard Pnar. The purpose was to accommodate linguistic diversity, not to erase it.

Mawroh should answer one simple question. When Rev. Thomas Jones developed the Khasi alphabet, did he include every sound found in the War, Bhoi, Lyngngam and other Khasi dialects? The answer is no. He adopted the Sohra dialect as the basis of the written Khasi language. Does anyone accuse Thomas Jones of trying to erase the identity of the War or the Bhoi? Certainly not. Every language requires a standard written form for education, literature and administration. Why should the Jaintia alphabet be judged by a different standard?

Developing a standard orthography does not destroy dialects. On the contrary, it provides the means to document, preserve and promote them. To portray the proposed Jaintia alphabet as an attack on the War identity is therefore not only inaccurate but also needlessly alarmist. Such a portrayal risks creating suspicion where none exists and misrepresents the painstaking work of the JHADC Alphabet Committee, which consciously took into account the linguistic features of the War dialects. Instead of encouraging informed public discussion, this line of argument may lead readers to believe that the initiative is driven by cultural domination rather than language preservation, despite the absence of evidence to support such a conclusion. Public debate on sensitive questions of language and identity should be guided by facts and careful analysis, not by claims that are likely to deepen misunderstandings among communities with a shared history.

More broadly, the article repeatedly reduces "Jaintia" to nothing more than a geographical label. That ignores centuries of history. Identities evolve. Today, Jaintia is a living historical, cultural and social identity shared by the people of the Jaintia Hills. Acknowledging the distinct identity of the War does not require denying or diminishing the Jaintia identity.

The War and the Pnar are not rivals competing for ownership of history. Their histories are deeply intertwined. We honour the War best by celebrating their unique heritage, not by rewriting history in ways that set one indigenous community against another.

History deserves careful research, balanced interpretation and respect for evidence. It should bring communities together, not encourage narratives that place them at odds with each other.

I would also urge the author to exercise greater responsibility when writing on matters of identity and history. The Jaintia Hills have always been home to the Pnar, War, Bhoi, Biate, Hadem and other communities who share a common historical legacy despite their distinct identities. Intellectual debate is welcome, but it should not be framed in a way that pits Jaintia Pnar against Jaintia War or creates the impression that one identity can only survive by weakening another. The strength of the Jaintia people lies in their diversity and shared heritage, not in narratives that fragment them. If we are truly committed to preserving our history, we must write in a manner that builds understanding and unity rather than deepening differences among our own people.

Finally, I would respectfully urge Mawroh to exercise greater caution before making sweeping claims about Jaintia history and identity. The history of the Jaintia people is complex and cannot be reconstructed through selective readings of folklore or personal interpretation alone. No individual has the authority to redefine the identity of an entire people without broad historical, linguistic and documentary evidence. If Mawroh wishes to advance new historical interpretations, he should first present the sources, methodology and evidence on which his conclusions are based, so that they can be examined and debated on their merits.

Perhaps it would be more useful if Mawroh were to write a comprehensive article on the sources of Khasi history-examining oral traditions, colonial records, indigenous chronicles, archaeology, linguistics and other primary sources. Such a discussion would enrich public understanding and encourage informed debate. What the people of Meghalaya need is careful historical inquiry grounded in evidence, not assertions that reopen questions of identity and risk creating unnecessary divisions between the Jaintia Pnar and the Jaintia War, who have shared a common history for centuries.

Yours etc.,
Mantre Hame Dkhar,
Via email

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

THE GLOBAL BIRD CRISIS



Every year, billions of migratory birds connect the world's continents, oceans and ecosystems as they undertake epic journeys between their foraging habitats and their breeding grounds.

A bobolink (Dolichonyx oryzivorus) leaves its breeding grasslands of North America for the Pampas of South America.

A Newell's shearwater (Puffinus newelli) spends months soaring across the North Pacific before returning to the Hawaiian Islands to breed. A spoon-billed sandpiper (Calidris pygmaea) travels from Arctic Russia to the rapidly disappearing tidal mudflats of Southeast Asia for its nonbreeding season.

These birds could hardly be more different. They occupy different habitats, follow different migratory routes and face different threats. Yet they share one remarkable characteristic: Their survival depends on networks of habitats stretching across thousands of miles and multiple countries.

Today, all three species and many others are in trouble. Their migrations remain among nature's greatest spectacles, but the birds themselves are increasingly at risk as the habitats and ecological connections they depend upon are lost or degraded and threats to their survival and ability to reproduce increase.

We study migratory birds as scientists. With an international group of colleagues, we just published a comprehensive assessment of the status, threats and conservation efforts involving more than 3,380 of Earth's migratory bird species.

The results are sobering. We found that more than half of the world's migratory bird species are declining because of an array of threats, including habitat loss, invasive species that harm birds, collisions with buildings, hunting, the pet trade, toxic pesticides and, in some cases, being caught in commercial fishing nets.

But our study offers a second conclusion with more hope. The science around migratory birds has changed dramatically over the past two decades, and conservation can help save these incredible species — if governments act before they become endangered.

Protecting birds across their epic journeys

If migratory bird conservation is refocused on the birds' full annual cycles, it can protect birds and their habitats throughout the year, from their breeding grounds to their nonbreeding homes and their migratory routes in between.

This approach combines protecting and restoring important places, reducing threats wherever they occur. It also relies on international cooperation and proactive conservation led by engaged governments before species become endangered.

Migratory birds are far more than remarkable travellers. They pollinate plants, disperse seeds, control agricultural pests, transport nutrients between ecosystems and support local economies by drawing birdwatchers and ecotourism. Their declines are not simply a loss of biodiversity; they signal a growing breakdown in ecosystems that sustain both wildlife and people.

The encouraging news is that humans have never been better equipped to reverse these species' declines.

Miniature tracking devices, genetics, automated radio telemetry networks, long-term monitoring and citizen-science initiatives such as eBird that document species numbers around the world have transformed knowledge of migratory birds' habits and the risks they face. For the first time, scientists can follow individual birds across continents and determine where conservation actions will have the greatest impact.

A new strategy

For much of the past century, migratory bird conservation focused on protecting important places, such as the breeding grounds, wetlands, nonbreeding habitats and migration stopover sites birds depend upon.

That strategy has been enormously successful and remains indispensable. Protected areas have prevented countless extinctions and will continue to be a cornerstone of biodiversity conservation. But research has revealed something equally important: Protecting places, while essential, is often not enough to conserve species whose lives unfold across continents and oceans. It's also important to understand where and when populations are most at risk and address those constraints across the birds' entire annual cycle.

The three species that opened this story illustrate why.

Bobolinks breed across North American grasslands but spend much of the year in South America. Conserving breeding habitat alone cannot reverse their declines if grasslands continue to disappear or if birds are poisoned by pesticides.

Newell's shearwaters spend most of their lives over the Pacific Ocean but return to Hawaii to breed, where artificial lights, collisions with power lines, and introduced predators such as domestic cats threaten already vulnerable populations.

Critically endangered spoon-billed sandpipers depend on a shrinking network of tidal mudflats that serve as stopover sites between their breeding grounds on Russia's Chukotka Peninsula and their nonbreeding areas in Southeast Asia.

Losing even a handful of these staging areas can jeopardize one of the world's rarest migratory birds.

Each species requires a different conservation strategy, but all require the same way of thinking: conserving their entire annual cycle rather than focusing on a single place, season or threat.

Fortunately, this approach is already starting to take hold in the United States and demonstrates what is possible.

What success can look like

Road to Recovery is an international initiative designed to reverse the losses of North America's fastest-declining bird species before they require protection under US endangered species legislation.

Rather than waiting for populations to collapse, Road to Recovery brings together scientists, governments, conservation organisations, landowners and local communities to form species working groups. These groups help identify the harms bird populations are facing and how to be more surgical in where limited conservation dollars are invested.

Today, more than 50 international working groups are developing conservation strategies for species including bobolinks and lesser yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*) to evening grosbeaks (*Coccothraustes vespertinus*) and yellow-billed cuckoos (*Coccyzus americanus*).

Their work has already led to new research, habitat protection, policy changes, hunting reforms and international partnerships.

International agreements such as the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals, along with regional flyway partnerships and treaties, provide ways for nations to work together to conserve migratory species across political boundaries.

However, the convention's effectiveness is severely hindered when many of the world's largest, wealthiest and most influential countries have not signed on to it. That includes the United States, Canada, Mexico, Russia and Japan.

Broader international participation and sustained investment from governments can help translate scientific knowledge into coordinated conservation action across the full annual cycle.

But governments cannot do it alone. Landowners, businesses, conservation organisations and individuals all have roles to play. They can help protect and restore habitat and reduce threats, such as free-ranging cats and collisions with buildings. They can support bird-friendly policies and participate in citizen-science programs that help track migratory bird populations.

Applying these lessons

There is every reason for hope.

Around the world, conservation initiatives repeatedly demonstrate that when threats are identified and addressed, bird populations recover. The pesticide DDT almost caused the extinction of species such as the bald eagle, peregrine falcon and osprey, but humans stepped in, banned its use, and all species recovered.

The challenge now is applying what science has found.

Next spring, bobolinks will once again return to North America's grasslands. Newell's shearwaters will navigate thousands of miles of open ocean back to Hawaii. Spoon-billed sandpipers will once again attempt one of the world's most extraordinary migrations.

Whether future generations can continue to see these magnificent migrations will depend on the choices of current generations and the steps they take to save them. *(The Conversation)*

Authored by Peter Marra, Georgetown University; and Nathan W Cooper, Smithsonian Institution

Over half of world's migratory bird species declining, warns study

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi — **Sunday, JULY 26, 2026**

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon opposite Mars on your solar return chart and it will give excellent results for you. You may get involved in an exciting romantic tie with a person known to you. It will be an intense and passionate affair leading to marriage. You will be put in situations where you will have to take quick decisions. You will show maturity in dealing with different problems of life. You will get an opportunity to show your creative skills at your place of work. Your distinct style of thinking will help in meeting lot of challenging situations. You will interact and spend a lot of time with people on one-to-one level. And will also coordinate with those people with whom you work or share your thoughts, Your financial situation will remain strong. You will undertake lot of business-related trips. You could be drawn to spiritualism in a big way and will develop religious inclination.

'This week for you'

Aries : (March 21 - April 20) It is going to be a successful week overall. Your liberal and flexible attitude will help you maintain your dominance in your work field. Work done by you will be fully successful and will win you lot of praise from others. You will be on the move and meet a lot of people. You will also enjoy wonderful bonding with your partner/spouse. You will also pay attention to your household affairs. You will be busy shopping and buying news items for your home. You will be busy preparing for festivals at home. Students will get success in interview/exams.

Taurus : (April 21 - May 21) You will be caught in flurry of activities this week. Some of your work might get stalled due to your overconfidence. And it will be worthwhile postponing some of them for now. You will pay attention to your work/business. Financial gains are indicated. Your bosses and colleagues will help you a lot. You will be advised to use your money in the right place. You will also clear some of your outstanding dues. You will enjoy excellent relations with your spouse. Love birds will spend lot of time together and will understand each other's feelings very well. Overall, you will be happy. But you need to be somewhat cautious too in personal matters. There will be an unknown fear in your mind which you need to get over. There is absolutely nothing to worry about.

Gemini : (May 22 - June 21) A new project will catch your attention, and you will devote your full time to it. You will also get an opportunity to make progress in your job. You will be hungry for success. There are chances of success in interviews. You will also have wonderful times with your family and friends. You will go as a guest and enjoy yourself. Students will acquire new knowledge and skills. You will be busy with studying, research, games, meditation and prayers. Some new people will come into your life, and you will welcome this positive change. You will also extend a hand of friendship to poor, old and needy ones. Working women will get full support. The placement of planets will bring peace and calm.

Cancer : (June 22 - July 22) It is going to be a week which will bring changes in your personality and attitude. You will get new job/business offers. Your time will be spent on business activities and professional engagements. You will have monetary gains. All your plans will move in the direction of fructification. Your pending work will gather speed. Your life will gather speed. Your life will once again be back on track. You will also perform noble deeds. There will be an increase in your prestige and name. You will also come closer to your mate. The atmosphere at home will be peaceful. Auspicious functions will also take place at your home. Romance with partner will deepen. In money-related matters you will move forward with intelligence and cleverness. You will be full of enthusiasm and energy. You will make plans. There will be praise from all quarters.

Leo : (July 23 - August 23) The beginning of the week will be terrific. There will be an increase in your work efficiency. You will be caught in a controversy but will come out of it with ease. Your name and fame will rise. You will have monetary gains. Those who are in job could get promotion. You can also plan to enter a joint venture or partnership in business. An unknown person will help you a lot. Your family and friends will support you. You will be unable to understand how your problems are getting solved with ease. But you need to take care of your health and extra expenses. You will get a hold on your financial condition. You will also plan to go out on a trip with your partner and enjoy peace and bliss amidst natural surroundings. Some incident will happen that will give solace to your mind.

Virgo : (August 24 - September 22) Your time will be spent on useful activities. You will be able to do even impossible tasks. You will remain in the spotlight and will enjoy all the attention that you get. You will also impress people with your attitude and will also be able to get your work done. The placement of Jupiter will take you towards success in life. And you will remain under control of things most of the time. You will face the struggles of life with a lot of confidence and money will keep coming. Your partner will be very happy and support you fully. New sources of money will open. There will be an increase in the number of material things. You will plan to buy a house/property or vehicle. You will attain your objective in your work and business.

Libra : (September 23 - October 23) It is a great period for mental peace and bliss. You will remain grounded and realistic. You will not let your ego come in between your career and personal gains. You will keep things to yourself and not talk about your plans with anyone. With your liberal and positive attitude, you will be successful in winning over your friends. A dispute in the neighborhood will get resolved. Those who are in politics, media and social work will shine. Some pleasant news will be received from a relative. You will meet a famous personality too. Your time will be spent in joy, laughter and amusement with your family members. You will also read some inspiring and knowledge giving literature. You will feel enlightened.

Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22) It is going to be a wonderful week from all perspective. You will get success in whatever you do. You could be promoted suddenly in your job. You will have monetary gains. Your boss will also be in your favor. And colleagues will obey your orders. Your job prospects will also improve. You will also explore options to increase your income and profits. The passage of time is in your favor. Working women will get full support. They will be able to establish a balance between house and office. You will also support your partner. He/she will be faithful and loyal to you. You will also make lot of contacts in social circle. You will be strategically clear and intelligent. You will also spend it with open hands. Preparation for some auspicious function will also be made.

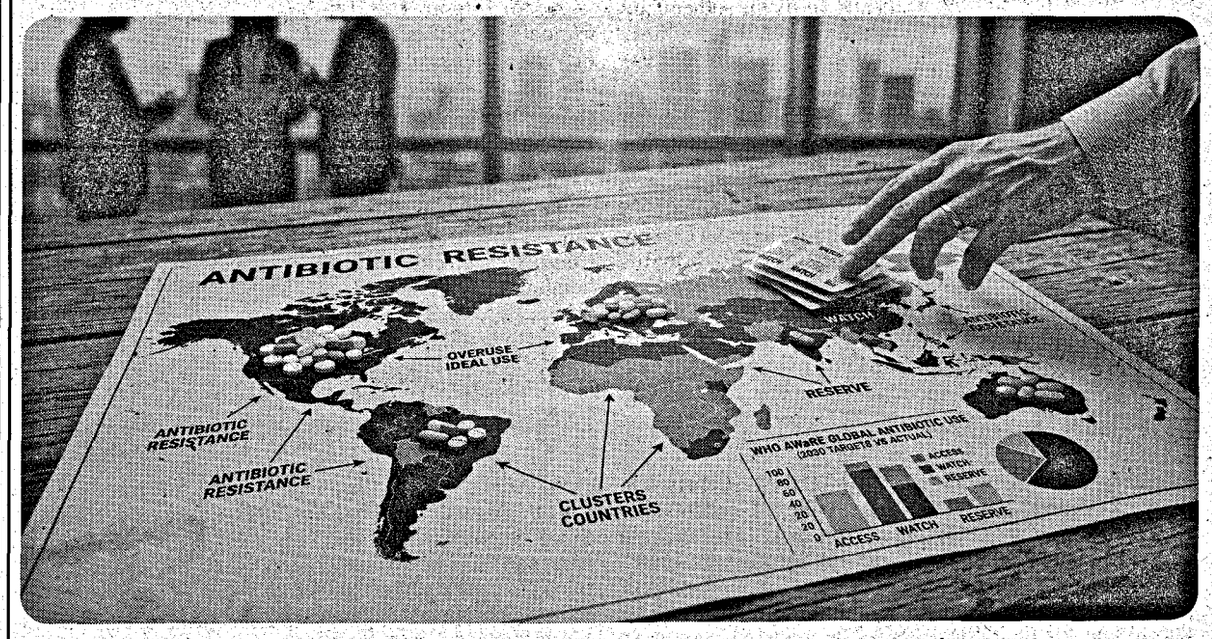
Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21) This is going to be a normal week. You will feel new energy inside you. Your talent will be reflected. And your hard work will be duly rewarded. You will also move in the right direction. Your business will prosper and flourish. You will take aid and advice from others. You will have monetary gains. You will also enjoy a fascinating journey in your love life. Love mates will come closer and enjoy wonderful bonding and will trust each other. You will be ready to make all sacrifices to make your partner happy. You will enjoy a blissful married life. You will complete your work very fast, ending all the hurdles on your way automatically.

Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20) It is time to take stock of the things and review your priorities. The tide won't be favorable to begin with. Your income will be good, but your sky rocketing expenses may put you in a financial crunch, forcing you to even incur a loan. Hence, you need to be careful. Due to your poor health, you may postpone your social commitments. But by the middle of the week, you will be in command of the situation. Your work will start to get completed and you will feel a lot more relaxed and confident. Your peers and bosses will support you. You will get over all your problems intelligently. Guests may come and you will treat them quite lavishly. You may get exhilarating news from your progeny.

Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18) There will be gains from all directions. You will pay attention to work plans and achieve success at work. You will also complete your work as a mission. You will discharge your responsibilities well. Your peers and bosses will support you fully. You will have sweet relationship with your spouse/partner. Overall, you will be well and enjoy peaceful times. You will have mental peace. You will be attracted towards spiritualism and religion. You will be receptive towards advice. You will socialize a lot and meet lot of people. Your professional commitments will also keep you engaged. The situation in business will be normal. You will get busy preparing for a festival.

Pisces : (February 19 - March 20) it will be a victory day. You will work very hard and your desires will be fulfilled. You will complete your tasks. You will also become a favorite of your bosses. You will also win trust from your seniors. You will get closer to your partner. You will balance your professional life as well as domestic life well. You will get the blessings and affection of your parents. You will be successful in defeating your opponents and winning a competitive exam/test. Business-related trips will keep you busy. You will earn money on long-distance journeys. You will be successful in whatever you do. Friends will give full support. You will feel satisfied.

Global overuse of antibiotics fuels rising 'superbug' threat



A study that has estimated which and how many antibiotics a country could be expected to ideally use has found that almost all countries are overusing 'watch' antibiotics, which contribute the most to antibiotic resistance when overused.

The 'watch' class is composed of stronger drugs that should be saved for conditions where simpler antibiotics won't work. The analysis is published in The Lancet Public Health journal.

Researchers, including those from the UK's University of London, have developed a framework, which they said can give countries a practical tool to assess whether their antibiotic use is broadly appropriate for their situation. The method can also help address both overuse and the wrong use of certain antibiotics, they said.

The World Health Organization (WHO) classifies all antibiotics into three groups -- access, watch and reserve -- according to a drug's potential to cause resistance. 'Access' drugs such as amoxicillin are the first line treatments for the most common infections, while 'reserve' ones are the last resort, used against the most dangerous drug-resistant infections.

In 2024, the United Nations General Assembly agreed that the WHO Access, Watch, Reserve (AWaRe) system should form the basis for global antibiotic surveillance and that by 2030, at least 70 per cent of the global use should come from the Access group.

However, no method for deriving country-level targets was recommended, even as previous studies have reported estimates of antibiotic use in more than 200 countries and territories, the researchers said.

The team's framework groups countries into peer clusters based on shared characteristics, such as poverty levels, rates of infectious disease and antibiotic resistance.

Four clusters -- cluster one to cluster four -- were ordered from the lowest median gross national income per capita to the highest.

The researchers calculated that in 2019, around 43 billion courses of antibiotics were needed globally, averaging out to about one antibiotic course per person per year, to treat all bacterial infections.

They also estimated that about 77 per cent of the courses should have been 'access' group antibiotics -- the result suggested that the UN target of 70 per cent is reasonable.

Comparing the study's estimates with real-world data from 67 countries -- from the IQVIA MIDAS database -- the researchers found that nearly three-quarters of countries were using more antibiotics overall than needed.

"Of 67 CTAs (countries, territories and areas) with observed antibiotic use data available in our analysis, 72 per cent used higher total antibiotic volumes than expected and 99 per cent used more 'watch' antibiotics than expected," the authors wrote.

More than half of the countries and territories with available real-world data were not using enough 'reserve' antibiotics, meaning patients with life-threatening drug-resistant infections might not be receiving the treatments they need, the study found.

Further, 60 per cent of the countries were found to be still using antibiotics that WHO considers should no longer be prescribed.

India (in cluster two) was estimated to have an optimal total defined daily doses (DDD) per 1000 inhabitants per day (DID) ranging between 9.9 and 14.7, while the actual DID was 18.3. DID of 'watch' antibiotics formed the major part of the actual DID at 9.3, and 'access' DID was 4.5.

The researchers highlighted a global inequality -- low and middle income countries, which face heavier burdens of infectious disease and drug resistance, need proportionally more of the specialised watch and reserve antibiotics, compared to wealthier nations.

However, higher-income countries are currently using these types of antibiotics the most, they said.

The authors called for national policies to both reduce unnecessary prescribing and improve access for patients who genuinely need the medicines. *(PTI)*

"Forgiveness says you are given another chance to make a new beginning."

—Desmond Tutu

The Shillong Times

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People's power

FACED with odds, retreat from a stated position is not a new characteristic of the Narendra Modi Government. Yet, the withdrawal of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan from the Union Cabinet on Saturday caused a major loss of face to the dispensation. People's power triumphed. The Government had remained ambivalent in its responses to the student offensive for weeks. It ultimately relented and accepted all the demands of the students protesting under the banner of the newly crafted Cockroach Janata Party (CJP). There was no other go. The Government could not afford to keep the national capital paralysed for long. A fear of the unknown was palpable. With Metro Stations shut and Internet-linked communication suspended for several days, the Government also faced a huge embarrassment in Parliament where it could not conduct business for a full week. International media began questioning the Prime Minister's carefully cultivated image of unassailable leadership strengths. In a jiffy, such images got deflated like a hot air balloon.

By Saturday, the RSS thought enough was enough and began openly expressing its disquiet. Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi warmed up and threatened to challenge the Modi dispensation's arrogance of power, through protests at the national level. The Prime Minister took the easy way out – making a scapegoat of his Education Minister after dismissing several 'errant' National Testing Agency officials failed to tame the fury in the streets. The students were resolute. The ranks of the protesters began swelling. Lathi-charges produced the reverse effect, turning the youth more aggressive. The BJP found its main support base – the middle class urban voter – eroding. Some 2 million mostly urban families had faced the brunt of the NEET fiasco. Their children were out in the capital's streets in strength. CJP gave them the platform to take on the Government while established political parties and their leaders had vacillated and proven their impotence. A 30-year-old youth had to fly down all the way from Boston and a climate activist from Ladakh to take the fight straight to the enemy's den. History was made in a few weeks.

This is a big lesson and a loud warning to the shameless breed of hand-in-the-honeypot political class that fails to take up people's issues. Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi himself was found wanting, but he ably warmed up at a decisive phase of the student protests. His direct entry in the midst of the action added a new energy to the cause and helped the movement achieve success. Many think now that this is the beginning of the end of the Modi era. His weak attempt to distract attention from the hit his leadership took was evident in the release of a video late on Saturday, "highlighting" a "proud moment for every Indian"—citing that an entity from Uttar Pradesh "entered" the UNESCO World Heritage list. Millions who tuned to the video in the hope that he would speak up on the student unrest were disappointed albeit not surprised over its outlandish content. Even in the pathos of a misadventure, Modi has not lost his penchant to remain oblivious to the big realities on the ground.

When FIFA 2026 met War Jaiñtia Patronymic Tradition

By H.H. Mohrmen

Now that the 2026 World Cup is over and the media spotlight has shifted elsewhere, there are a few things about this World Cup that stand out, especially for the people of Meghalaya. It was a pleasant surprise for the Government of Meghalaya when the official FIFA Instagram page posted about the Chief Minister Football Fan Club arrangement, and later even FIFA President Giovanni Vincenzo Infantino praised the initiative. The government has every right to feel proud because its efforts were appreciated by none other than the FIFA President, and the Chief Minister deserves a pat on the back for this innovative idea.

Although not every citizen of this state visited these Football Fan Club arrangements, perhaps except those who live near the towns and cities where they were organised, the idea was later copied by other state governments too.

Another gift from the government to the public was the holiday declared for all educational institutions in the state on the day after the final football match. My wife, who is also a school teacher and watched the whole match until the crack of dawn, said to me, "It is very thoughtful of our Chief Minister to give us a holiday today." I replied, "Yes, and I think that is also one of the reasons why the state's performance in education is poor, because students are always treated as the audience of last resort."

For instance, whenever there is a function that requires a crowd to fill the hall and satisfy the ego of politicians, students are always the target audience. In many functions, if it were not for the students, the chief guests would be speaking to an empty hall. In the process, the students and the accompanying teachers lose precious learning hours. Add to that we have random holidays like this one. One wonder how many states declared a holiday after the final match of FIFA 2026.

The Most Controversial World Cup

Some will remember July 20, 2015, when FIFA President Sepp Blatter arrived at the organisation's headquarters in Zurich for his first major press conference after announcing his plans to leave office. FIFA was then in the grip of an international corruption crisis. Less than two months earlier, Swiss authorities had arrested seven senior football officials after the United States charged several football administrators with racketeering, fraud, and bribery.

Before Blatter could begin speaking, British comedian Simon Brodkin approached the stage in character as "Jason Bent," placed banknotes in front of Blatter, and announced that the money was for North Korea's bid to host the 2026 World Cup. As security officers removed him, he threw the remaining notes over Blatter's head, leaving the FIFA President standing beneath a shower of cash before the stage had to be cleared.

The stunt turned FIFA's corruption scandal into a powerful image of football's most influential administrator buried in money. Blatter later returned to announce that FIFA would elect his successor in February 2016, but the crisis surrounding the organisation did not end there.

Current FIFA President Giovanni Vincenzo Infantino has taken FIFA into a new era of controversy. The Swiss football administrator has served as FIFA President for almost a decade after serving as UEFA Secretary General from 2009 to 2016. He has also been a member of the International Olympic Committee since 2020. As FIFA President, Infantino has overseen three World Cups: Russia 2018, Qatar 2022, and the 2026 tournament hosted by the United States, Mexico, and Canada. However, it was only this year that the controversies linked to him became highly visible.

The Peace Prize

Infantino's first major controversy during this World Cup cycle came on December 5, 2025, when he presented United States President Donald Trump with the inaugural FIFA Peace Prize at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., just before the official draw for the 48 nation World Cup. The award, consisting of a gold trophy, medal, and certificate, recognised what FIFA described as Trump's "exceptional and extraordinary actions to promote peace and unity."

The award immediately attracted criticism. FairSquare, together with several European politicians and Human Rights Watch, filed an ethics complaint against FIFA, arguing that presenting such an award to a political leader violated FIFA's claim of political neutrality. Critics also pointed out that neither the FIFA Council nor its vice presidents had been consulted about the selection, and FIFA has never explained how the recipient was chosen.

The Balogun Suspension

The second controversy centred on United States forward Folarin Balogun. During the Round of 32, Balogun received a straight red card for a foul on Bosnia and Herzegovina defender Tarik Muharemovic. Under FIFA disciplinary regulations, the offence automatically carried a one match suspension and normally could not be appealed.

Days later, FIFA unexpectedly reversed its decision by issuing a brief statement placing the suspension under a one year probationary period and allowing Balogun to play against Belgium in the Round of 16. President Trump later said publicly that he had personally called Infantino to request that the case be reviewed. Reports also suggested that the reversal was not even decided by the full disciplinary committee but by a single FIFA official acting alone.

Balogun played against Belgium, but the United States lost 4 to 1 and was eliminated. Infantino denied any political interference, insisting that FIFA's judicial bodies act independently and decide cases according to the regulations and the facts before them. FairSquare has since asked the International Olympic Committee to investigate whether Infantino breached rules on political neutrality, citing the Balogun case together with his public support for Trump's Nobel Peace Prize nomination and the creation of the FIFA Peace Prize.

When Fair Play Failed Iran

Perhaps the treatment received by the Iranian team should be one of the most embarrassing episodes for FIFA, because football is supposed to be fair to every participating nation. The Iranian team was based in Mexico and had to travel from Mexico to the United States for every match. This was clearly unfair.

Anyone who has travelled internationally knows how much time is spent clearing immigration and security checks, not to mention the additional complications arising from the tense political relationship between Iran and the United States. The Iranian team reportedly had very little opportunity to train properly before their matches. FIFA should have intervened to ensure that every team participating in the World Cup received fair and equal treatment. Unfortunately, that did not happen.

Lamine Yamal and the War Jaiñtia Tradition

While the tournament was going on, a meme of Lamine Yamal was shared in a popular War Jaiñtia WhatsApp groups. Not surprisingly, it was an artificial intelligence generated image showing Lamine dressed in traditional War Jaiñtia attire. At the bottom was a statement claiming that he was the son of a War father. They actually have a point. The claim is based on an old War Jaiñtia naming tradition in which the eldest child of a family is named after the father's clan. This explains names such as Tariang because the father belongs to the Tariang clan, Chen from Pohchen, Lah from Khonglah, Chiang from Myrchiang, Du from Padu, Bareh from Bareh, and Min from Lamin. The meme therefore jokingly suggested that the Spanish football star was named Lamine because his father belonged to the Lamin clan. Jokes apart, there is more to this than humour, and it deserves a closer examination. For many years I did not know that there was a specific term for this naming tradition. I first wrote about it simply out of curiosity because I wanted to share this unique custom with the wider world. It was only later that I came across an academic paper which cited an article I had written in The Shillong Times many years ago about this unique War Jaiñtia tradition of naming children after their father's clan.

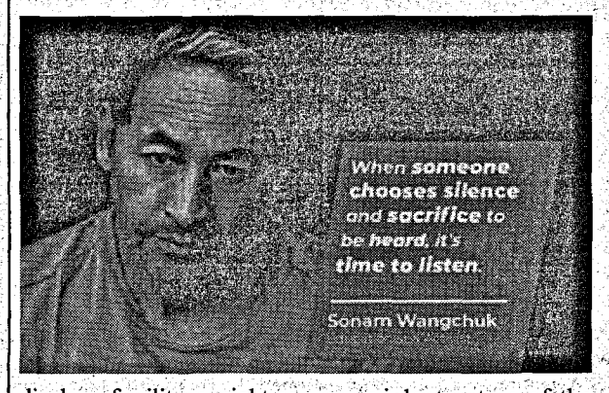
The article discussed the practice of naming a child after the father's clan, or by using one syllable from the father's clan name. It was once a widespread custom among the War Jaiñtia people. It was through a paper by Risa Hilari Wahlang of the Department of History, University of Delhi, titled A Curious Case of Patronymic Tradition in a Matrilineal Society: A Case Study of Nongtalang, Meghalaya, published in the IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, Volume 28, Issue 7, Series 2, in July 2023 that I realised this tradition had a recognised academic name. I am very happy that one of my articles became the basis for a research topic pursued by a young scholar. Later I also discovered that this was not the only academic paper that cited my articles published in The Shillong Times. There are also other papers which cited my article and that gives me immense satisfaction and inspires me to continue writing about our culture and traditions.

The Legacy of Gandhi

By Col. Arindam Bardhan

In early 2017, I had been to Addis Ababa on my way to India from the Indian UN contingent deployed at Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). When booking a local taxi to take me around, the driver was overjoyed to know me as an Indian. He would take me to Gandhi, he insisted. I was puzzled. It seemed a weird idea to be offered to be taken to a dead Indian in a distant African capital! I curiously followed the exuberant Ethiopian to this yet unknown place. On reaching, I was pleasantly surprised to know the place named Gandhi. The street roundel had a huge statue of the Indian legend, the local bank, the hospital, the school all bore the same name. Last month, when our Honourable Prime Minister Shri Narendra Damodar Modi visited the Seychelles, he too bowed to the larger than life size statue of the Indian legend.

The idea of Gandhi has been under attack for the past few years in the current disturbing global scenario of might being the only right. When Russia - Ukraine war flared up in 2022 and continues to this day, or recently when USA attacked Iran in response to Israel-Palestinian conflict in 2023, the world has constantly moved to rearming itself at a rate not seen since the Second World War. New alliances and technological drift towards militarisation through AI, continuously portend



display of military might as the new political language for powers coming to age. Coupled with the scourge of non-state actors, regions like Pakistan's internal protests and counter military reprisals, Afghanistan Pakistan border, or our own state of Manipur seem increasingly drawn into the vortex of unending violence.

Matters took to a heady mixture of social unrest around our neighbourhood with states like Myanmar, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Nepal and recently Bangladesh struck by violent Gen Z protests. Each protest spiralled into retributions and punishments for people caught on opposing sides with differing ideologies or communal identities. India too saw its share of organised violence in West Bengal on the RG Kar Hospital incident or the teacher recruitment scam in 2025. The sense of unrest amongst the youth was palpable due to the uncertainty in the neighbourhood and social media adding fuel to the already vitriolic situation around the neighbourhood.

When the NEET fiasco unfolded in the national capital on May 12, 2026, it was linked to the series of failures in the education system straining at the sinews of the exasperation of an already disillusioned youth. It did not help that an indifferent remark by the highest Court of the State labelled unemployed individuals and activists as "cockroaches". The dam of disillusionment of the youth had reached its peak with reports of NEET paper leaks lighting the tinder.

Sonam Wangchuk was not new to this diffident situation. Being an educationist, he had been closely studying the local problems of the ecological fragile regions of Ladakh, creating many innovative solutions such as Ice Stupa, passive solar heated buildings and SEMCOL alternative school. He was awarded various national and international recognitions for his yeoman service at grass root levels and education. He had raised various core demands for protection of the fragile Himalayan ecosystem and organised protests in 2025, which had turned violent, leaving four dead and many injured. He was held for 170 days in detention under stringent National Security Act in September 2025 to be subsequently released in March 2026. The current student activism was galvanised with his expression of solidarity for student demands through indefinite fast from 28th June 2026. Social media was rife with allegations of the protests' intent, from foreign hand to a conspiring opposition. The sequence of activity till the Education Minister's resignation on 25th July 2026 is known to all.

Prime Minister Modi addressed the youth through a personal message on social media on July 24, 2026. The joint government delegation met Sonam Wangchuk at Medanta Hospital on the same day when he finally broke his fast. The Education Minister's resignation followed soon after. What was evident was the youth across the country had been stirred by the sacrifice and suffering generated by the fasting activist and the accompanying students. All efforts to discredit the movement fell flat when the MEA acknowledged no foreign involvement in the pan India student movement. Amidst the daily contest of narratives and counter narratives, in spite of all sorts of physical and virtual provocations, what was steadfast was the non-violent nature of the protests across the country. A new generation Satyagrahi in the shape of Sonam Wangchuk rekindled hope amongst countless despondent youth, giving them belief in their commitment and capability. When the world was hurtling towards violent Armageddon, the national stir was channelized towards peace activism through an act reminiscent of our freedom struggle. Citizens who were critical of the power of self-sacrifice in a militaristic age and sceptical of a lone man in a loin cloth moving the British Empire, were proven the collective might of individual self-sacrifice for nation building by the individual acts of the activist and his followers.

By the time the dust settles and the Parliament ratifies new laws to curb leaks as committed by the Prime Minister, one may forget the chronology of events leading to the unrest and its consequent actions. What will be remembered, however is that the timeless Indian values of brotherhood and self-sacrifice still wield the capability to steer a restive society to political solutions. Satyagraha as a tool of conflict resolution was vindicated by the Gandhian approach through Sonam Wangchuk's peace activism. Through display of sacrifice over destruction, committing faith on the youth to steer the peaceful protests, changing the heart of an indifferent state, all displayed the collective power of the human conscience. The individual soul proved superior to the state machinery, galvanising millions in its stride. It is hoped that this brand of activism finds more and more resonance in the Indian community as well as the regional neighbourhood and global society in the quest for a more peaceful and equitable society for our future generations.

(Colonel Arindam Bardhan, SM, is an alumnus of the St Edmunds College, Shillong. He is serving with the Indian Army currently and posted to the 58 Gorkha Training Centre, Shillong. Views are personal).

Letters to the Editor

Pradhan's Resignation In Vain if Systemic Deficiencies in Education System Not Addressed

Editor,

The resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan in the aftermath of the NEET-UG controversy marks a significant moment in India's educational and political landscape. By stepping down, the Minister has accepted moral and administrative responsibility for the examination irregularities and the unfortunate developments that followed, including nationwide student protests and an erosion of public confidence in the examination system.

Yet, accountability should not end with a resignation. The episode must become a catalyst for structural reforms. The NEET controversy, involving more than two million aspirants, has once again exposed the enormous consequences of even a single lapse in a high-stakes examination.

The debate should now shift from assigning blame to strengthening institutions. The Union Government should constitute a permanent National Examination Reforms Commission comprising eminent academicians, examination specialists, psychologists, technology experts, jurists and student representatives. Such a body should periodically review the functioning of national testing agencies and school examination boards, recommend technological and administrative safeguards, and conduct independent audits of examination processes.

Recent controversies have not been confined to NEET alone. Reports concerning procedural and OMR-related issues in national-level examinations, besides recurring concerns over evaluation practices, indicate that examination management requires continuous monitoring and improvement. Likewise, it would be unrealistic to assume that State Boards are entirely free from similar vulnerabilities. Every examination authority, whether national or state-level, must be subjected to periodic professional review to ensure transparency, fairness and credibility.

It is equally important that demands for ministerial resignations are preceded by careful fact-finding and objective assessment. Accountability in a democracy must rest on verified facts and institutional responsibility rather than political expediency. Corrective action is most effective when it is accompanied by evidence-based reforms.

If the systemic deficiencies exposed by the present crisis remain unresolved, India may continue to witness examination irregularities, student unrest, public agitations and recurring demands for resignations. That would address the symptoms but not the disease.

The true measure of this episode will therefore not be the resignation of a minister alone, but the government's resolve to build a transparent, secure and globally credible examination system that safeguards the aspirations of millions of students.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

Parking Fee Collectors Violate Latest Notification

Editor,

The Urban Affairs Department, vide its Notification dated 27 April 2026, revised the roadside parking charges in Greater Shillong Planning Area by abolishing 'High Demand' and 'Low Demand' parking areas and prescribing a uniform parking fee of Rs. 10 per hour for two-wheelers and Rs. 20 per hour for four-wheelers. Despite this, parking fee collectors continue to charge the earlier rates of Rs. 20 for two-wheelers and Rs. 40 for four-wheelers, in blatant disregard of the Government notification. When confronted, parking attendants resort to rude behaviour, intimidation and outright refusal to comply with the revised rates.

The Commissioner & Secretary, Urban Affairs Department is therefore requested to look into the matter and initiate appropriate action against such illegal collection and misconduct.

Yours etc.,
D. Bhattacharjee,
Shillong- I

Corporate India's Stunning Silence

Editor,

The resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan on Saturday, following a massive nationwide protest against the leak of the NEET question paper, has signalled several issues that are notable for all in a democratic country. First and foremost, Pradhan and for that matter, the Government, admitted that irregularities occurred in the NEET-UG examination held on May 3, 2026. Even as the agitation gathered momentum, the government had removed as many as 47 officers of the National Testing Agency.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has, in the meantime, announced major steps like fast-track courts to try paper leak cases to set things right. The government has also approved a draft bill to ensure stricter punishments for paper leaks. Mention must also be made that the agitators were given a bit longer time because of the government's initial reluctance to reach out to their leaders.

What, however, must be appreciated is that, sensing trouble, the Prime Minister finally dispatched two senior ministers to meet Sonam Wangchuk and end his hunger strike. Following this meeting, the government held talks with the agitation leaders on Saturday.

While it is not clear whether Pradhan resigned due to the Prime Minister's advice, his resignation has prompted the group to call off the agitation. Dharmendra Pradhan, who has spent nearly four decades rising through the ranks of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), RSS, and the BJP, is the first Union Minister to resign since Narendra Modi became Prime Minister.

What we must also remember is that Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation has demonstrated that India's youth can compel political action to be taken based on their demands. Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation has demonstrated that India's youth are capable of carrying out a sustained movement against injustice.

It is an international phenomenon on the basis of which governments had been changed by the movement of young protesters such as in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh but in India it was peaceful.

Additionally, the resignation, which came in the wake of the youth-led protests, signals a significant shift in the political landscape of the country. The series of incidents, starting with the question paper leak, the rescheduling of the NEET, the suicide of numerous candidates, the nationwide protest, and Sonam Wangchuk's hunger strike leading to the Education Minister's resignation, clearly highlights the urgent need to address the concerns of the youth, particularly at a critical moment when the Prime Minister has placed his hopes on them to guide the country through to 2047.

Corporate India's calculated silence

The second, more glaring pocket of silence is corporate India. This is not very surprising. Business people have always sided with whoever is in power, trumping social responsibility, moral integrity and public support. If many in the mainstream media, especially TV news broadcasters, have been given a public lashing in the ongoing student protests, then almost about as much hate has come the way of India's decade-long ruling duopoly, the Adani and Ambani groups.

In the last 12 years, if there is one pocket that has been consistent in kow-towing the line of the government, it is India's corporates. Every Union Budget has scored a robust 11 out of 10, every new scheme has been hailed by corporate India as being "revolutionary", "visionary", and promising to change India's fortunes.

If the protests, and Pradhan's resignation, have revealed to the world that the emperor is naked, then so is corporate India. Naked in their self-interest, and naked in their fear of retaliation. The student protests have been a moment of reckoning for India. The reckoning may not be contingent on corporate India's support, but it will certainly determine the future of India's youth and its businesses.

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*

"Success is how high you bounce when you hit bottom."
— George S. Patton

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Revisiting Meghalaya's Tourism Policy

MEGHALAYA and the capital city of Shillong are thronging with tourists whose contribution to the local economy is frugal. A good number of such tourists are seen walking around Police Bazar late in the night at 10 pm and above, eating at street corners to cut costs. In the morning they are seen having breakfast again at some of the roadside stalls with no place to even sit but they are fine as long as they can cut costs. The question then is whether these tourists really add to the economy of Meghalaya or whether they only add to the carbon footprints and the garbage that the state is struggling to tackle.

A robust Tourism Policy should take stock of the daily incomes accruing from entrance fees at tourist destinations and home stays/hotels. How many tourists coming to Meghalaya are actually high end tourists and what is the percentage of the low-budget ones? Those earning the most from Meghalaya's tourism circuits are the tour operators of Guwahati who actually plan the itinerary down to the last detail. Much has been debated about the Assam registered vehicles earning their incomes from transporting tourists to Meghalaya. There were suggestions to copy the Sikkim model where taxis from West Bengal are not allowed beyond a point and tourists must compulsorily hire local Sikkim-registered vehicles. But attempts to stop Assam-registered vehicles at a particular point in Meghalaya beyond which they have to use a Meghalaya-registered vehicle led to Assam taxis staging a dharna and threatening that Meghalaya-registered taxis would not be allowed to enter Assam to drop off or pick up passengers from the airport and railway stations. And that was the end of the effort. Without government to government intervention such arrangements will not work.

The problem is that those in the Government who run the Tourism Department are desk-bound and are hardly aware of what happens on the ground. Tour operators, however, are expected to give constant feedback and find ways and means to improve the entire tourism experience. Sohra seems to have got its act together under the leadership of long-time tour operator Alan West Kharkongor. Young tourism guards have been placed at some of the vantage tourist viewpoints; they instruct tourists not to litter but to pick up the garbage they have thrown and put it in the litter can. For a while now some tourists have been bringing their utensils and cooking stoves and parking anywhere they want to start cooking. In the end they leave behind the leftover food and peels for someone else to clean. This is not the kind of tourism that Meghalaya needs. This state cannot afford to be a garbage dump. Garbage disposal and processing is a huge challenge. As of now the main tourist venues resemble garbage dumps after the tourists leave for the day. Where does the garbage go? Most often it is thrown into the ravines and those who care to look below the viewpoints will see loads of plastic waste which would make it very dangerous for anyone to retrieve. Tourists lack civic sense and this is what the State Tourism Department and tour operators must tackle. Otherwise, the time is not far when the whole of Meghalaya will become a garbage dump. By then no tourist worth his salt would want to visit the place.

"Balance ambition with patience" — But balance it with what, exactly?

By Napoleon S Mawphniang

On July 25, 2026, our Education Minister Lahkmen Rymbui stood at the 91st Foundation Day of Lady Keane College and told the assembled students something that, on the surface, sounded perfectly reasonable. He told them to balance ambition with patience - (yes with PATIENCE). He said that today's youth are impatient (I dont know how true is that) - . That they try everything at once and end up knowing nothing. He said — and I'm quoting here because I want to be fair — "The foundation has been laid, the platform has been created, and now we must move forward together."

I read that. I sat with it. And then, slowly, a question surfaced that I couldn't shake.

Balance ambition with patience — but balance it with what, exactly?

Because here's the thing about patience. It's a virtue. Every grandmother in every village in Ri Bhoi will tell you that. But there's a kind of patience that is genuine, earned, grounded in hope — and then there's another kind that is simply... waiting. Waiting with no reasonable expectation that anything will arrive. Waiting the way Josef K. waits in Kafka's The Trial, standing before a door that the system tells him is "his door," a door that was built specifically for him — and yet it never, not once, opens.

When we tell a twenty-three-year-old graduate from Umsning to be patient, we'd better be sure there's something worth being patient for. On the very same day, something else was happening in Shillong. The Meghalaya UPSC Vision Conclave 2026. Panellists gathered — an IAS officer, a 2025-batch IAS topper, a former Education Minister, the editor of this very newspaper — and they spoke earnestly, with clear good faith, about Meghalaya's persistent underrepresentation in the Civil Services. They spoke about financial constraints. Limited coaching. The absence of a competitive environment. The KSU General Secretary, Reuben A. Najiar, pointed out that financial barriers continue to shut deserving students out (The Shillong Times, July 26, 2026).

All of this is true. All of it deserves to be said. I do not quarrel with the conclave.

But Socrates — that magnificent, infuriating old man who made powerful Athenians so uncomfortable they eventually poisoned him for it — had a method. He wouldn't accept the first answer. He'd probe. He'd pull the thread. He'd ask: but what do you actually mean by that?

So let me pull the thread.

We are holding conclaves to help Meghalaya's youth enter the All India Services — to serve the nation — while our own state government's sanctioned posts sit empty like unlit rooms in a government building nobody bothers to unlock. Officers retire. Officers die in service. The chair goes cold. And the vacancy? The vacancy enters what I can only describe as the bureaucratic digestive system — it travels through one committee, gets noted upon, moves to another desk, gets "considered," and then, quietly, it just... stops. No appointment. No notification. No explanation.

Ask any young person in this state who has ever tried to get a government job. Not the UPSC level. The basic, state-level, sanctioned-post level. Ask them what the process feels like from the inside. They'll describe something Kafka drew better than any policy paper ever could — a machinery that appears to function, produces the right paperwork, speaks the right language, and delivers absolutely nothing.

Is this - where Meghalaya's youth unemployment really lives. Not in the statistics, though the statistics are damning enough. As per - The Periodic Labour Force Survey 2023-24 documents youth unemployment in states like ours with a frankness that government press releases rarely match. But the real damage isn't numerical. It's psychological.

It's what Paulo Freire, the Brazilian — called the theft of possibility (Yes - the theft of possibility) . When a young person can no longer imagine a future that belongs to them, the system has already won. No protest needed. No crackdown required. Just silence. Slow, steady, institutional silence.

Now. Let me be precise about something, because I believe in being precise.

The problem isn't simply that there aren't enough jobs. The more unsettling problem is that the jobs exist — on paper, in sanction orders, in budget provisions — and are simply not filled.

Let me ask my friends , in the spirit of honest inquiry: if a sanctioned post is vacant, the salary for that post is allocated in the state budget. Where does that money go when the post sits empty for two, three, four years? Is it lapsed? Reallocated? To what, exactly? I'm not insinuating anything dramatic. I'm asking a plain administrative question that every taxpayer and every unemployed graduate in this state is entitled to a plain administrative answer on.

And another question,maybe last - because one is never enough when you're trying to understand something honestly: what is the Meghalaya Public Service Commission's average turnaround time — from the date a vacancy arises to the date an appointment is made? Does any department track this figure? And if nobody tracks it, isn't the absence of that tracking itself a kind of answer?

Wittgenstein, in his Philosophical Investigations, argued that the meaning of words is found in how they are actually used — not in what they claim to mean. So when a government spokesperson says recruitment is "under consideration" or the process is "ongoing," I ask in Wittgenstein's spirit: what do those words actually do? What action do they produce? In whose life does "under consideration" become a job offer?

Meanwhile, the KSU has accused the government of finding excuses to stall the MRSSA — the Meghalaya Resident Safety and Security Act (as perThe Shillong Times, July 26, 2026). A different issue, yes a diffrent issue..... But -the pattern beneath it is identical- yes identical ..... A structure exists. A mandate exists. And yet it doesn't move. Selective paralysis — that's what I'd call it. Not incompetence across the board. Something more specific. A system that moves quickly when it wants to, and develops mysterious administrative complications when it doesn't.

Ambedkar understood this (clearly) . He didn't just fight caste (system) — he fought the architecture of exclusion- yes exclusion. He knew that a constitution on paper means nothing to a person who cannot access its promises in their actual, daily life. He wrote that political democracy cannot survive without social democracy at its base. I'd extend that further: democratic governance cannot survive without economic inclusion at its base. A young person who cannot find work, who watches sanctioned government posts collect dust while their degrees collect shelf-space, does not experience the state as a democratic institution. They experience it as an indifferent landlord.

Orwell, always Orwell, put it most cleanly: political language is designed to give "an appearance of solidity to pure wind." Balance ambition with patience. Build ecosystems. Create platforms. Move forward together.

Beautiful. All of it. I'd applaud, genuinely, if behind the language there were a matching velocity of action. If every conclave on Civil Services preparation were matched by a transparent public dashboard showing how many state-level posts are currently vacant, how long they've been vacant, and when — specifically, with a name attached — they will be filled.

That's all. Not a revolution. A spreadsheet with accountability attached to it.

The youth of Meghalaya are not impatient. They are reasonable. There's a difference. Impatience is irrational urgency. What these young people feel is something far more rational — they've done everything asked of them. They've gotten the degrees. They've passed the examinations. They've waited, and waited again, and been patient as saints.

And still, the chair sits empty.In Greek mythology, Tantalus was condemned to stand in a pool of water beneath a fruit tree — fruit above him, water below — and every time he reached, both receded just out of grasp. The gods invented that punishment for a reason. It was the cruelest thing they could imagine. Not outright denial. Something worse. The perpetual almost.

That is what our state is serving its youth. Not a flat refusal. An endless almost. A conclave that says soon. A minister who says balance. A vacancy that says pending.

Pending what? Pending whom? And for how much longer?

(The writer is a practising advocate from Ri Bhoi District, Meghalaya. He writes as a concerned citizen, not as a representative of any political party).

Hum Honge Kamyaab (We Shall Overcome)

By Kynsai Ria Kharwaniing

There is nothing like taking charge of our own futures. These past two weeks I was proud to be a part of this generation. They call us Gen Z.

The last week brought Gen Z protests to your mobile devices from around the country. Students and youth of the country joined together to protest the leak of the NEET paper but also larger issues in education and to demand more accountability from the government. This was a carefully calculated and marvellously executed digital revolution.

One thing Gen Z is, is "chronically online". When Sonam Wangchuk was forcefully removed on day 21 of his hunger strike it sent in to gear a set of events that took over social media platforms. Students and content creators at Jantar Mantar began posting and then Instagram reels took over.

How did the protest get Gen Z attention and their stupendous support? We hopped on trends. "Be a part of history", "get ready with me; protest edition", "what's in my bag; protest edition" a trend popularised by Vogue and other fashion magazines to name a few of the trends that began circulating. There were also videos listing requirements of the protest and instructions in captions on how to get supplies to the location. These videos amassed 300,000- 900,000 views each with a few surpassing one million views in a few days. This was Gen Z curating content for a Gen Z audience.

The protestors sang songs from our childhood. We went from singing 'We shall overcome or Hum honge kamiyab', Vande Mataram and the national anthem in our school assemblies to singing together for justice and a better future. For the feeling of belonging to something bigger than yourself #relatable. "Din mein lathi, rath mein party" was trending on instagram, when post 12 o'clock Jantar Mantar turned to DJ nights and 'protestors got talent' shows. We truly used music and dance as our weapons.

We grew up reading about the freedom struggle in our social science textbooks. One can not help but draw a few parallels. We are a Gandhian country, and protestors payed homage to Sathyagraha. In instances of police brutality they turned the other cheek and did one better, with a few clever responses of their own. When tear gas cannons were shot into crowds, Gen Z responded by shoving the tear gas cannisters into pot holes with water which immediately diffused the gas. When the police men lifted their lathis, they sang the national anthem, and effectively called a 52 second stalemate. And when crowds got agitated they formed human chains in front of the police. There are videos showing protestors feeding RAF personnel, fanning police officers in the heat of the day and handing them water bottles too.

We were taught to love our country, to do what we must to contribute to our own societies and we were taught to question what we did not understand. And that is what Gen Z did. Girls asked police persons, "Why are you hitting us? We are just students standing here."

Despite signal jammers these videos and posts were able to provide real time updates from the protest on social media platforms and thus garnered the support of a generation. It set off a chain of peaceful Gen Z protests across the country and the world. With Indian students singing 'give me some sunshine' across the world. Over 600,000 posts with the hashtag 'jantarmantarprotest' have been posted on Instagram so far, and 2.5 million posts with #cjp.

Response to these posts came in many forms. Medical students and young health care professionals flew to Delhi to volunteer their services. Students and supporters who could not be there sent food, water and medical supplies through delivery platforms like Blinkit, Swiggy and Zomato, with UPI platforms there to transfer funds from donors. This was Gen Z fueled by the GIG economy. Many students are also GIG workers who work at night to support their families and pay for their own education. This was a digital movement as much as it was physically present at Jantar Mantar, Delhi.

A usually unreactive Prime minister released his own video response on Instagram, addressing the youth as 'friends', which received it's own backlash with meme responses using the song "We can't be friends" by Ariana Grande a song with a message of unrequited love. Also in response are reels critiquing the. PM's video, "Talk faster it is a reel not a parliament session", "it needs a hook- hello friends is not a hook" and "improve cam angle" these videos too have thousands of views. The PM's social media team has indeed improved camera angles with the latest video which has the PM announcing a task force on examination reforms.

My classmates and I are currently spread out across the country teaching in villages and towns. We are bachelor's of education students interning at schools as part of our final year course work. Through our busy days of teaching and preparing to teach we too have been online following the protest, scrolling through reels every night. In a Whatsapp poll of 25 trainee teachers, 23 said they followed the protest on social media platforms. This week we get to tell our students, Gen Alpha, that the largest democracy in the world is one worth fighting for.

From dancing the night away, protest site clean-up crews and clear documentation of police brutality this was a peaceful protest that we have much to learn from. Gen Z went from unheard, to underestimated and eventually the ultimate underdogs.

The education minister submitted his resignation letter on Saturday, July 25. While the resignation of one minister may not fix systemic issues it restored faith in one thing, WE can make a difference.

One small step down for him, one giant leap for democracy.

Jain Hind.

(The writer is a Gen Z, BSc BEd Biology, Azim Premji University)

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Letters to the Editor

Mirabai Chanu's Golden Hat-trick Brings Glory to India & our North-East

Editor,

Mirabai Chanu's remarkable achievement at the 2026 Commonwealth Games has made us all proud. Her golden hat-trick is yet another feather in the cap of North-East India. Although she belongs to Manipur, her success is a moment of celebration for all of us in the North-East, including the people of Meghalaya. By winning her third consecutive Commonwealth Games gold medal in the women's 48 kg weightlifting event, she has once again shown the world the strength, determination and sporting spirit of our region.

Her record-breaking lift of 85 kg is a testimony to her years of dedication, discipline and perseverance. It has added another glorious chapter to India's sporting history and inspired millions of young people across the country.

Her sport's journey reminds us that with hard work, courage and self-belief, no dream is beyond reach. Her success, I do believe, will encourage many young boys and girls from the North-East, including Meghalaya, to take up sports with confidence and aspire to represent the nation on the world stage.

The entire nation salutes this extraordinary daughter of North East and wishes her many more successes in the years ahead.

Yours etc....,
Jairaj,
Via email

NEP 2020: More Courses, More Fees, Fewer Teachers

Editor,

The announcement that only 49.8% of students from the first NEP 2020 undergraduate batch have passed should alarm every parent. When more than half the students fail, the question is not simply whether students studied hard enough, but whether colleges fulfilled their responsibility to provide quality teaching.

As a father, I find it unacceptable that while colleges proudly claim to have implemented NEP 2020, many appear to have done so without appointing qualified teachers for newly introduced papers such as the Multidisciplinary Courses (MDCs), Skill Enhancement Courses (SECs), and Value-Added Course (VAC). Instead, these subjects are often assigned to existing faculty, regardless of whether they possess the required expertise, merely to avoid recruiting additional teachers.

NEP 2020 is not just a change in nomenclature; it introduced a fundamentally new academic framework. Yet, instead of investing in competent faculty, some colleges seem to have treated these courses as an administrative formality while expecting already overburdened teachers to shoulder extra responsibilities. The ones who ultimately pay the price are the students.

A 49.8% pass percentage is not merely a statistic; it is a serious warning that something is fundamentally wrong with the implementation of the new curriculum. Colleges cannot celebrate NEP 2020 on paper while cutting corners in the classroom. What makes this even more unacceptable is that many colleges collect additional fees from students for courses such as the Multidisciplinary Course (MDC), Skill Enhancement Course (SEC), and Value-Added Course (VAC), yet fail to appoint qualified teachers to teach them. Instead, they simply redistribute these courses among existing faculty, regardless of specialisation, as a cost-saving measure. If colleges are willing to charge students extra but unwilling to invest in qualified faculty, they have little moral authority to blame students for poor academic outcomes.

The NEHU and the Education Department must investigate whether colleges have provided adequate faculty and academic support for NEP courses. Accountability must begin with institutions entrusted with educating our children, not with the students who have become the first test subjects of an inadequately implemented reform.

Yours etc.,
Tynshain K Lyngdoh
Via email

Kudos to Bethany Society

Editor,

Congratulations Jyoti Sroat School! Congratulations Bethany Society, Meghalaya!

A deep sense of jubilation and gratitude resonates in the 'heart' of Bethany Society on the occasion of one of its units, Jyoti Sroat School securing the top position in the Meghalaya School Performance Grading Index (MSPGI) 2025-2026 (released on July 24, 2026).

Over the years the vision of Bethany Society, Meghalaya – "We dream.....of an earth fully alive, where everyone enjoys fullness of being," has driven us into a relentless pursuit of research, innovations and the dare to implement them into our varied programs.

Jyoti Sroat School started as a special school for the blind in 1993 and evolved into an institution practicing inclusive education for All children by the year 2006.

Incorporating best practices for enhancing inclusive education in its true sense, learned nationally and globally, the goal has been and is towards student competency and teacher competency as per the NCERT Learning Outcomes (since 2012) and the Danielson's Framework for professional development in teachers.

As a lead partner in the Regional Action for Inclusive Education in the North East (RAISE - NE) Program (2016-2022) the organization adopted the Universal Design for Learning (UDL Framework) as a base for lesson plan designing and transaction. This is evident in the teacher training manuals developed through this project which are used by Jyoti Sroat School and for any Teacher Training programs in Inclusive Education that the organization offers. It is with pride to mention that many of the new features of the NEP 2020 are practiced by the school and embedded in the Teacher Training manuals well before the policy came into force.

The crux of it all is 'the child in the center', 'whom we teach', surrounded by 'where we teach', 'what we teach', 'how we teach', and 'how we assess'.

We believe that.... all children can learn:

- The child is not the problem; the system is the problem.
- The child is happy to come to school and happy when he or she leaves school for the day.
- We segregate garbage.
- Children are linked to the Environment and Employability as part of their learning.

As such, a majority of our past pupils with or with no disability, are presently employed in Corporations across the country or absorbed on merit by the State Government of Meghalaya. The teaching staff of the school includes teacher with disability who are qualified and trained, teaching All children. The most recent felicitation the School has received is the 'Global Inclusive Education Network (GIEN) – Purple Innovator Award 2025 – 26' for promoting Innovative Methodologies and Inclusive Practices in Education.

It has been a journey of forty years or so and none of it all would have been possible without the leadership and untiring mentorship of Dr Carmo D Noronha. I salute the Principal of the School, Ms. Larisa Nongspung, the teachers, all staff members, and all students for this achievement, with the selfless support of parents, members of the School Managing Committee and members of the Governing Body of Bethany Society, Meghalaya.

What is happening now in promoting the use of technology by students and teachers in all learning spaces is the partnership and networking with well-meaning organizations across the country that offer financial and expert support to the school. To put on record: Benetech India, Vision Empower – Bangalore, Samarthanam Trust – Bangalore, Mitra Jyothi - Bangalore, Mjunction – Kolkata, Indic AI - N.Delhi, Vision Aid India – Chennai, Enable India - Bangalore.

Our deepest appreciation and gratitude go to the Social Welfare Department, Meghalaya, the Education Department, the National Institutes and Individual mentors from universities and institutes across the country. We welcome educators, policy makers and friends to visit the Jyoti Sroat School for feedback that will contribute towards the further growth of the school and in learning together we subscribe to the cause of quality education.

Yours etc.,
Bertha G Dkhar,
Via email

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

"The family is the nucleus of civilization."
— Will Durant

The Shillong Times

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Wake-up call

CURIOUSLY, and appreciably, the Supreme Court is in a 'course-correction' mood. Chief Justice Surya Kant, who opened a Pandoras' box and unleashed the genie by his patently unbecoming comments in the apex court, has surfaced quite late to "explain" that his branding of youths as cockroaches was aimed at new lawyers, and not the wider spectrum. By which time, however, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was already battling an unforeseen enemy, a crowd of impatient young men and women that swelled by the hour at Jantar Mantar evening after evening, seeking education minister Dharmendra Pradhan's scalp. A threat loomed in the horizon that the Cockroaches would scale up their demand and target Modi himself. That the chief justice understood the seriousness of the situation and effected a climb-down to remove 'misconceptions' about or 'misinterpretations' of his words and postures before matters got further out of control, deserve acclaim in an otherwise hopeless scenario.

For the establishment to take a step or two back is very much in the scheme of things in a democratic society. A reason also why Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who blissfully ignored the disaster that fell on the over 2 million bright students in the form of the NEET fiasco, chose in the end to break his pregnant silence and released video clips on social media to woo the cockroaches as his 'friends.' Except that Modi realised a bit late in the day that the sand was slipping from under his feet and that of his party, battered as they were by waves of energetic but unarmed protesters. The urban middle class erupted into the capital's streets with a vengeance at the precise time when Modi also faced intense pressure inside Parliament for a full week since July 20. For once, there was no blood on the PM's face. Modi, who could browbeat the Opposition figures by unleashing the ED and CBI on them frequently, got no stick to beat the cockroaches with, other than the batons of Amit Shah's police and stones of the security personnel. The mass of students were however, game for this too. A cornered Modi thought discretion is the better part of valour. This too fits well with our system of perceived people's power.

Point to note, however, is the cockroaches have changed the rules of the game politicians play. Making noises in parliament and culminating these with a walkout was the standard style of protests of easy-going politicians in the opposition ranks for long. They neither sought nor got results. They hesitated to put the government on the defensive. Modi excelled with his soliloquies from the pulpit and the opposition with the dramas they staged in parliament. The Cockroach movement changed this rule. It drilled sense into the minds of the narcissists on rival sides of the political spectrum. The weeks-old movement extracted their pound of flesh from these 'men with feet of clay'. This should be just the start. It's time to clean up the Augean stables, lock stock and barrel. Politicians need to see the writing on the wall. For the judiciary too, this here is a wake-up call.

BJP, meet CJP – How a youth-led movement is rejuvenating Indian democracy

By Rahul Saikia

Paper Leaks. Students Protest. Minister Resigns. The chronology provides the broad contours of the story.

But the images, reels and memes provide a larger picture of the churn in Indian democracy. After a decade of being spoken down to, the youth of this country have spoken back and how! With anger, humor, conviction, and street power. In doing so, they have upended a plethora of conventional wisdoms including the seemingly unshakable supremacy of the PM and the ruling party and the presumed inability of the people (especially the youth) to challenge the political status quo.

The Cockroach Janta Party's (CJP) protests leading to Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation provides a rare and promising case of 'the people' fixing accountability in a government which otherwise considers itself the prime custodian of good governance. Furthermore, the CJPs victory signals the possible emergence of a progressive counterbalance against the seemingly pervasive conservative agenda of the ruling party, which makes for a more pluralistic and healthier democracy.

For more than a decade, it had become a truism, that the prime minister and the BJP were simply far too powerful, and that change is impossible – least of all from likes of Gen-Z protestors. To be fair, the citadel of power had been jolted several times – in the less than impressive Lok Sabha results, in previous state election upsets, and during the previous farm protests.

Yet, in each of these cases, the status quo remained unchanged – no matter what happened, the prime minister and his party ultimately seemed unshakable. Seasoned commentators and shrewd opposition politicians all seemed to quietly understand that it was far more practical to negotiate their survival – rather than to openly oppose the ruling party.

However, even amongst those who otherwise support the BJP, there was a familiar refrain in private, that the ruling party was taking its majoritarian chest-thumping too far. In public, these concerns were couched in the politically correct language that the country simply lacked an effective opposition.

That is until a few days ago.

The CJP's youth-led protest has changed (or at least challenged) this grand narrative of PM Modi and the BJP's seemingly unassailable power and popularity. In the process, the CJP led street protests also completely upturned another narrative – that the youth of this country are far too apolitical, conformist, or unconcerned with the future of the country.

Prior to these protests, it was quite common for the older generation to look upon the youth (especially Gen-Z) as a vast, homogenous, social media-controlled demographic incapable of critical thinking and political action. Instead, the young protestors at Jantar Mantar revealed how they were in fact the ones least enthralled either by the ruling party's propaganda or the mass cynicism of the older generation.

A more detailed analysis will likely provide a more nuanced picture of Gen-Z's strengths and weaknesses, and of the diversity within this vast demographic. For now though, these young protestors have reminded us of certain qualities – courage, chutzpah, and confidence – which most of us had forgotten in our public life.

For more than a decade, it had become a truism, that the prime minister and the BJP were simply far too powerful, and that change is impossible – least of all from likes of Gen-Z protestors. To be fair, the citadel of power had been jolted several times – in the less than impressive Lok Sabha results, in previous state election upsets, and during the previous farm protests. Yet, in each of these cases, the status quo remained unchanged – no matter what happened, the prime minister and his party ultimately seemed unshakable.

For more than a decade, PM Modi stood on his top-down podium to deliver his Maan-Ki-Baat lectures to the people. No press conferences, few unscripted interactions. Far from the savvy politician he presents himself to be, this method of delivery is reminiscent of politicians from a black and white past, when long and laborious one-way speeches were transmitted from Delhi to dutiful listeners clutching their radio sets across the country.

And while the PM engaged with social media, the carefully orchestrated posts seemed straight out of a state-owned broadcaster's propaganda toolkit – except, to be fair – for certain melodic moments. Yet, in recent days, the same sense of 'distance' which the PM had crafted had emerged as his Achilles heel. Gen-Z, with its preference for spontaneous expression was unimpressed by the PM's seemingly scripted sympathy for their concerns.

On the ground, the BJP suffered from the same disadvantage of distance. Comfortably ensconced in the bastions of power, the ruling party had effectively vacated the streets, possibly under the assumption that the youth lacked the grit for the kind of street protests that the BJP's veterans had mastered decades ago.

Gen-Z's use of social media – whether in terms of shaping the narrative, mobilizing support, or highlighting police violence vis-à-vis the humanity of protestors – will emerge as a case study of organic political mobilization in the digital era. The BJP's formidable propaganda machine, which has so effectively utilized social media to blunt opposition and alternative narratives, was left utterly trounced by Gen-Z's dominance on the digital battlefield.

Beyond the CJP's victory, the protests at Jantar Mantar also revealed a larger chasm in Indian society: that between young outspoken liberals unafraid to voice their demands versus the more conservative sections of our society (i.e. those willing to stand and serve). The dynamics between these two overlapping demographics will likely shape the nature of politics in the country in the decades to come. For now, the liberal camp is enjoying its hard-fought moment in the sun. The months and years to come will provide a broader and more detailed portrait of the varied liberal and conservative strains within the Gen-Z demographic.

Some reels – of students sharing lighter moments with police - suggest bridges can always be built. That said, a barrage of other posts – purportedly showing security personnel assaulting women, threatening to plant drugs on students, and pellet firing on unarmed protestors – reveal the vast distances between peoples and institutions.

That said, several media outlets and commentators noted how some amongst the supporters were either erstwhile supporters of the BJP, or children of BJP supporters. This indicates a challenging trend for the BJP, suggesting that the country's electorate is moving further towards policy and governance-based issues.

Commentators are correct in pointing out that the resignation of the education minister amounts to neither a full-blown reformation of the system, let alone a revolution. However, the CJP's first victory opens up a new field of governance and issue-based opposition politics. To be fair to the government, it has been willing to accommodate the demands of protestors on issues of governance – even as it has lashed out at dissidents who dare to question its religious nationalism or territorial sovereignty.

This in turn provides an opening for the CJP and other like-minded parties. While the BJP's long reign has been marked by improved last-mile delivery of welfare schemes, its success in other sectors such as education and urban infrastructure has been a mixed bag – providing a platform for effective opposition mobilization.

While common policy-based issues can bring diverse groups together, identity-based issues are much trickier – with the BJP's majority card often acting as a bulwark against minority interests/movements, even as each state/region offers its own divisive equations of dominance and oppression. Here too, religious and identarian parties should ponder how an enlightened youth will be able to distinguish between genuine community interests and the performance of tradition and patriotism in pursuance of power.

Given these challenges, it is far too early for the liberal camp to declare victory. A wounded lion is dangerous. A wounded Leviathan even more so. The RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat has called on the government to develop a logic and reason-based dialogue with the country's youth. One wonders if that is a way for the RSS supremo to chastise the PM and ruling party for engaging the public through other more emotional means. One hopes the BJP will take the RSS' advice and learn to engage in a more democratic dialogue with the people of this country.

There is much that the government can learn from its people. More broadly, there is much that liberal India and conservative India can learn from each other. The government can either encourage a constructive dialogue between them as part of its nation-building responsibility, or it can choose to divide and rule. History will judge the government for how it chooses to shape this dialogue.

The Invisible Editor

How Algorithms Rewrote the Story of Jantar Mantar—and Why It Matters to Every Citizen

By Jairaj Chhetry

History has never been merely a record of events; it has always been a process of discovery. It was reported by journalists, verified through field reporting, scrutinised by editors and then debated by citizens in homes, classrooms, marketplaces and public squares. Every morning, newspapers presented a carefully assembled account of the previous day's events. Television news, despite its limitations, operated within a visible editorial framework. Facts could be contested, opinions often differed, but the public conversation generally began with a common body of information.

That shared information landscape is undergoing a profound transformation. History still unfolds on the streets, in courtrooms, universities and public protests such as the recent NEET demonstration at Delhi's Jantar Mantar. Yet before many citizens have the opportunity to understand what has happened, an invisible editor has already begun rewriting the story for millions of individual screens. This rewriting no longer takes place only in newsrooms. It is driven by algorithms operating inside data centres, powered by recommendation systems, engagement metrics and machine-learning models that predict what each user is most likely to click, watch, share or engage with.

The recent students' protest at Delhi's Jantar Mantar against the alleged irregularities in the NEET examination offers a compelling illustration of this transformation. The protest occupied physical space for some days, but its digital life continues long after the banners were folded and the crowds dispersed.

The recent students' protest at Delhi's Jantar Mantar against the alleged irregularities in the NEET examination offers a compelling illustration of this transformation. The protest occupied physical space for some days, but its digital life continues long after the banners were folded and the crowds dispersed.

For millions who never set foot at Jantar Mantar, the movement existed only through videos, reels, posts, headlines and comment threads delivered to their mobile phones. Many believed they had witnessed the entire event, when in reality they had seen only carefully selected fragments—content chosen not because it presented the complete picture, but because an algorithm predicted it would capture their attention.

One citizen scrolling through Instagram encountered emotional testimonies of students demanding justice, peaceful marches and appeals for transparency in an examination that shapes millions of young lives. Another, at precisely the same moment, was shown footage of traffic disruption, confrontations with police and commentary questioning the direction of the agitation. A third encountered political interpretations, while a fourth saw almost nothing at all because the platform concluded that the issue was unlikely to interest them.

None of these citizens were deliberately deceived. None were necessarily wrong about what they saw. Yet none had been shown the whole story. Each received a different version of reality, curated not for understanding but for engagement.

This is the defining paradox of the digital age. Public opinion is no longer shaped solely by journalism, public debate or the facts themselves. It is increasingly influenced by algorithms that quietly determine what deserves our attention, what disappears from our screens and, ultimately, how we begin to understand the world around us.

In this environment, the value of responsible journalism becomes greater, not smaller. Newspapers such as The Shillong Times, The Hindu, The Indian Express and other credible publications continue to rely on reporting, verification, editorial judgement and accountability rather than on an individual's browsing history. A reader may disagree with an editorial stance, but every reader encounters the same published report. That shared factual foundation remains one of journalism's greatest contributions to a healthy democracy.

Traditional journalism also carries something algorithms do not----accountability. Reporters can be questioned, editors can issue corrections and media organisations can be held responsible for errors or bias. Algorithms offer no such transparency. Their decisions are largely invisible, constantly changing and rarely explained to the public whose perceptions they shape.

This is why informed citizenship today requires more than simply consuming news. It demands conscious media habits: reading multiple newspapers, watching different news channels, comparing perspectives and resisting the temptation to accept a personalised social media feed as the complete truth. The responsibility of an informed citizen is no longer merely to stay updated; it is to remain intellectually curious enough to seek what the algorithm has chosen not to show.

One citizen scrolling through Instagram encountered emotional testimonies of students demanding justice, peaceful marches and appeals for transparency in an examination that shapes millions of young lives. Another, at precisely the same moment, was shown footage of traffic disruption, confrontations with police and commentary questioning the direction of the agitation.

The story of Jantar Mantar, therefore, extends far beyond one protest or one examination. It symbolises a deeper shift in the way societies construct reality. The most influential editor of the twenty-first century does not sit in a newsroom, write editorials or sign its name beneath a headline. It silently arranges what billions of people see, ignore and ultimately believe to be important.

Whether algorithms continue to shape our information landscape is no longer the question----they already do. The real question is whether citizens will cultivate the wisdom to look beyond the reality served to them. In a democracy, the freedom to think independently begins with the freedom to encounter more than one version of the truth.

"It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it."
— Aristotle

Letters to the Editor

India's Press Freedom: A Cause of Concern!

Editor,

Since 2014, I have virtually given a go-by to AIR (All India Radio) now rechristened Akashvani, a Sanskrit derivative, meaning Voice from the Sky; and to some extent, I have even distanced myself from some of my favourite newspapers as they have subtly deviated from the true essence of journalism! These vital media have in their true perspective, understandably, been influenced by those at the helms of power at the Centre.

The lack of objectivity in media reportage has been intuitively felt by all discerning people, thus indicating nuggets of truth! Noticeably, the recent hunger strike launched by the CJP in Delhi, with the full-throated goodwill support of Sonam Wanchuk, the 2018 Ramon Magsaysay award winner, has apparently not been highlighted in most social media/news media of our country.

Additionally, preceding the 16th general election since independence, my favourite pastime was to religiously listen to the news spotlight broadcast routinely at 9:15 PM by our erstwhile All India Radio, which focused on specialized discourse by expert personnel on plethora of subjects be it socio-economic, geo-political latest trends and much else. Regrettably, such a sense of self-fulfilment has since petered out.

No wonder, that every year on May 3rd, while we observe the World Press Freedom Day (initiated by Reporters Without Borders), the latter has startlingly placed India's press freedom at a very unenviable position of 157 out of 180 countries, under the current dispensation - lower than our bête noire neighbours like Bangladesh and Pakistan, which stand at 152 and 153 respectively. Hence, the incumbent Congress President, Mallik Arjun Kharge, could not have been more right when he stated, "A free press, in its true sense does not exist to amplify the government's narrative or conceal its failures. It exists to question authority, scrutinize power and hold those in office accountable."

Incidentally, on May 18 this year, while Prime Minister Narendra Modi was on a foreign jaunt to Norway, a Norwegian lady journalist, Helle Lyng, embarrassed PM Modi by asking, "Prime Minister Modi, why don't you take some questions from the freest Press in the World?" No response was forthcoming, thereby putting our Prime Minister on the mat! Hence the latest meme about 'Godi Media' has spread across India

Yours etc.
Jerome K. Diengdoh
Shillong – 2

When Nature Erases Boundaries

Editor,

The unprecedented cloudburst in Nagaland and the devastating floods that have engulfed large parts of Upper Assam are far more than another seasonal disaster. They remind us of a profound truth that humanity often forgets: while political boundaries may divide territories, natural calamities recognize no borders. In times of adversity, nature quietly teaches us that human destiny is interconnected.

The suffering unfolding across the affected regions is immense. Homes have been washed away, livelihoods destroyed and countless families displaced. Yet, amidst this tragedy, another story is unfolding—the story of compassion. Governments, voluntary organizations, religious institutions and ordinary citizens are joining hands to provide relief and restore hope. Such moments reaffirm that humanity remains our greatest strength.

Disasters also offer opportunities for introspection. The shared geography of Northeast India demands shared responsibility. Instead of limiting ourselves to administrative responses after every catastrophe, neighbouring states should institutionalize joint research, coordinated disaster preparedness and collaborative restoration programmes. The economically vulnerable inter-state border regions deserve long-term resilience rather than recurring emergency relief.

The COVID-19 pandemic offered humanity a similar lesson. The virus spared neither nation nor religion, neither the wealthy nor the poor. Even places of worship closed their doors, reminding us that all human beings belong to one family. Scientists worked across borders to develop vaccines. Humanitarian organizations served tirelessly, often risking their own lives. Across India, countless unsung heroes performed the last rites of abandoned victims with dignity, transcending barriers of faith and community. Those acts remain among the noblest expressions of human civilization.

The question before us today is simple yet profound: Have we truly learnt from these experiences? Or do we remember these lessons only until normalcy returns?

The encouraging sight today is that people from every walk of life are stepping forward to help flood-affected families. Communities are organizing relief drives, charitable institutions are opening their resources and citizens are contributing according to their means. Such generosity deserves appreciation. Our own mosque welfare committee, for example, has resolved to dedicate nearly eighty percent of its annual Zakat fund towards flood relief. Although true charity seeks no recognition, its spirit deserves emulation.

At the same time, the unprecedented scale of the disaster calls for equally unprecedented national support. Relief alone cannot become our permanent response. Every major calamity must be followed by scientific evaluation, honest policy review and comprehensive preparedness for the future. Climate uncertainty demands stronger institutions, better forecasting, resilient infrastructure and sustained cooperation across state boundaries.

Perhaps the greatest lesson of every catastrophe is that human relationships have no geographical limits. Compassion travels where maps cannot. When suffering unites us beyond politics, religion and language, we rediscover the timeless truth that we are members of one human family, sharing one fragile planet.

May these floods leave behind not merely memories of destruction but also a stronger commitment to cooperation, preparedness and human solidarity.

Long Live Our Planet. Long Live Humanism. Long Live the Human Race.

Yours etc.,
Nawab F Haque
Guwahati

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

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"If you want to shine like a sun, first burn like a sun."
— A. P. J. Abdul Kalam

The Shillong Times

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Assam Floods

THE devastating floods in Assam have resulted in 75 deaths so far and affected nearly 3.32 lakh people, which is equal to one-tenth of Meghalaya's population. Additionally, about 622 villages are inundated. Along with humans, livestock have also been carried away by the flood waters leaving farmers doubly affected. The worst affected districts are Sibsagar, Charaideo, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Dhemaji and adjoining Upper Assam districts. While the Assam Government has announced an ex-gratia payment of Rs 9 lakh for the families of each person who died in the floods the fact remains that money can never compensate for a human life. The Assam Government has also relaxed documentation norms to facilitate quicker compensation. The floods were caused mainly by cloudbursts in Nagaland, parts of Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. But it is also true that flood control measures were ignored in most areas where constructions have come up in swamps, marshes and wetlands which are natural flood control systems because they absorb, store and slowly release excess water. Instead of allowing rainwater to rush immediately into rivers, these areas act like giant natural sponges. However, experts have pointed out that Assam's rapid urbanisation and settlements along natural floodplains have reduced the land available to temporarily store floodwater. Even Deepor Beel and other wetlands which used to act as natural sponges have been filled up to allow construction. This is seen along the road to the airport.

For a while now Jorabat has been flooding after heavy rains, making it difficult for people traveling towards Meghalaya and Upper Assam or towards Guwahati to cross the floodwaters. Many travellers have unwittingly missed their flights or trains from Guwahati. Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has been vocal about the earth cutting happening on the Meghalaya hillsides along Jorabat and attributed the floods to such reckless quarrying projects. What needs questioning is how the Khasi Hills District Council has allowed such stone and sand quarrying at great cost to the environment. Where is the State Forest and Environment Department in all of this? Those managing the quarries are business entities from Assam so how were they able to get permission from the KHADC?

Meghalaya Government appears to have adopted a couldn't care less attitude even while the barren, exposed hillsides along National Highway 6 - visible on the right-hand side when travelling up to Shillong—threaten to cause landslides should there be a cloudburst. It would be interesting to know how the quarry owners managed to get clearances for extracting boulders and sand from these hillsides. What's the point in having a Departments of Mining and Geology and the Environment and Forests when individuals can acquire quarrying leases once money changes hands. It's time to file an RTI to find out the names of the quarry owners and which authority gave them the environmental clearances since large tracts of forests too have been cleared. Ri Bhoi district has several quarries that have come up and carry boulders to different states via Assam. This has been pointed out in the past but the Government has decided to look the other way. But at what cost? Already, hillside cutting for road making projects has caused severe landslides and death in different parts of Meghalaya. When will people wake up to this environmental crisis that threatens to leave nothing behind but devastation?

The Market Exists. So, Why Are Meghalaya's Farmers Still Poor?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Over the last few weeks, there have been distressing visuals of farmers dumping their produce at throwaway prices because of a lack of buyers. Then the National People's Party (NPP) Farmers' Unit found out that the demand for vegetables from Meghalaya has fallen significantly in major markets such as Siliguri in West Bengal and parts of Upper Assam. This was attributed to buyers sourcing produce from Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland at more competitive prices. This could mean many things.

Farmers from Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland may have increased their efficiency, which has allowed them to reduce their cost of production, thus making their vegetables more competitive in the market. However, if farmers are forced to sell at Rs. 2 per kg, this means that the prices the farmers from these two states are getting are also not very high. The only way the farmers from Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh will be able to compensate for the low price is through volume, and this is highly unlikely since the landholdings in these two hill states are similar to those in Meghalaya.

Transport costs could also be a factor, but they would be higher for states like Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh to distant markets like Siliguri, unless the railways are involved, which would reduce the overall costs. However, I suspect that there is an oversupply of vegetables in the market. This appears to be the case in Lower Assam, which is also purchasing fewer vegetables from Meghalaya because of adequate local production. For me, these appear to be the possible reasons why farmers from the state are not able to sell their produce; otherwise, the economics does not work.

One way out of this is to increase the efficiency of farming in Meghalaya, which simply translates to increasing the use of fertilizers and pesticides, the use of which is comparatively quite low by national standards. That, of course, comes with its own problems of long-term environmental degradation and serious health dangers to the local population. The negative relationship between pesticide use and health is well documented by the experience of the 'cancer belt of Punjab', where significantly higher cancer incidence rates are correlated with the heavy use of pesticides. The use of chemical fertilizers like urea has also been found to lead to contamination of soil and water bodies, along with the release of nitrous oxide into the atmosphere, not to mention the use of fossil fuels in producing these chemicals. Therefore, this is not a sustainable solution.

So, there is a need to find alternative markets for the produce of the farmers, which generally means establishing new markets or exploiting existing ones through niche products that can fetch a high price. In the latter case, we have examples of pineapple, oranges, and Lakadong turmeric, which, according to reports, are fetching good prices outside the state. However, not every farmer is engaged in the production of these crops, and neither should the extensive monoculture of only a few specific crops be encouraged. Such systems are less resistant to climate change and pest infestations, which will necessitate the use of more synthetic chemicals. So, a change in the farming system is not needed right now. Rather, it is the availability of markets for the existing produce. In fact, markets already exist in the state that can be immediately tapped into. These are the existing settlements in the state, i.e., towns and villages.

According to the 2011 Census, Meghalaya has a total of 6,893 villages, a number which should have increased by now. But even assuming that the number of villages stays the same, there are potentially 6,893 markets that already exist for farmers' produce. The potential customers here are of two types, viz., institutional and non-institutional. The latter would be the households residing in these villages, and in 2011 that number was 555,131, or more than 5 lakh households. If we assume that they would spend around Rs. 100 per day on buying various household necessities that amounts to spending of over Rs. 5 crore in a day, which translates to more than Rs. 2,000 crore in a year. The fact that Meghalaya is known to be a food-importing state means that domestic supply is insufficient to meet domestic demand, which, if simple economic logic is applied, should actually translate to higher prices. But this is not the case because prices get depressed due to agricultural produce arriving from other states. If one goes to the local market, one can find vegetables and other produce from both local farmers as well as supplies brought in from outside the state. Consumers prefer this situation because it makes things cheaper for them. But the flip side is that it makes farmers poorer because they are unable to get a fair price for their produce.

In a state like Meghalaya, where 80% of the population is based in rural areas and 60% of the workforce is engaged in agriculture, this leads to a situation where a large part of the population is unable to overcome poverty. This also means that 80% of the state's population has lower purchasing capacity, and therefore the demand for non-agricultural commodities will also be low because there is no extra cash to spend on such items. Poor prices keep farmers poor, which means a weakened market and therefore a weaker economy, and the cycle continues. It is no wonder the state is today one of the poorest in the country.

But while potential markets exist in the form of villages, with potential consumers being the households already residing in them, they are, at best, a long-term solution, and there is a need for something in the short term. It is here that there is a need to tap into institutional markets that are relatively easier to exploit.

The institutional markets are in the form of schools through their mid-day meal programme (now rechristened as 'PM-POSHAN'), ICDS, and various government institutions, e.g., prisons, hostels, government offices, etc. NESFAS (North East Society for Agroecology Support) has, in fact, been implementing a local procurement programme in some selected schools in the state, where the SMC (School Management Committee) enters into an agreement with local farmer groups to supply vegetables to the school. The school gets a regular supply of vegetables, which includes highly nutritious wild vegetables, while the farmers get access to an assured market. Thus, every school where PM-POSHAN is being implemented, which is over 13,000 schools in the state, is a potential market. This is true for the ICDS programme as well. The government could also mandate that canteens or shops within government premises must source vegetables from local farmers. Many homestays in the state have been built with government subsidies, and there should also be an agreement requiring them to buy vegetables from local farmers. Any hotels that have also come up with government support must do the same. If any institution or group is receiving or has received government support, they must be required to include such a clause in the agreement for receiving that support. As for the suppliers, the government already has details of farmer groups through its FOCUS programme. These groups can be tapped into and helped to enter into agreements with these institutions. In the case of institutions found not to be honouring the agreement, the support should be cancelled and any support already provided should be reimbursed. A few high-profile cases being punished will send a message to others, who will then adhere to the agreement.

In many countries, public procurement has been used as a means of providing farmers with a fair price. India's PDS system and MSP (Minimum Support Prices) are examples of this. However, this requires that the state shoulder the responsibility of acting as the market. In this case, though, the state only has to mandate a procurement system for institutions supported by it and ensure its implementation. After all, the government is already spending a lot of money on various livelihood initiatives, many of which are repeated across different projects. The common concern for all such initiatives is the unavailability of markets. Such an approach, as described above, uses existing programmes and institutions to function as those markets. As long as those programmes remain and as long as the government supports or maintains various institutions, a market is already assured. In the long run, as the financial capacity of the 80% of the population and the 60% of the workforce improves, they could become enduring customers, without restricting supplies from outside, which would not be fair to competition or to those who still depend on lower prices. But that is for the future. Right now, markets already exist for the produce of our farmers, and they must be activated immediately.

(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)

Thou Shalt not Pass

By Binodan Sarma

We all know what bullying feels like: We all know what a bully looks like. We know what bullying feels like. It is a repetitive, intentional aggressive behaviour involving a real or perceived imbalance of power, used to hurt, frighten, or coerce someone perceived to be weaker. Further reading on the mentality of a bully reveals that he/she relies on intentionally targeting vulnerable individuals, through threats, exclusions or manipulation to have their way through. We all have experienced such individuals in our lives. At least I have in school. The aftertaste of being bullied is harrowing, leaving a scar that shapes how an individual conducts themselves in society as an adult. And contrary to popular belief that a bully suffers from low self-esteem, research shows that they often possess strong social skills and a sense of entitlement. This they use to set a performance of hierarchy, deliberately pushing down those who they perceive as a threat to their thought process. It is not unknown that they are reactive and resort to aggression to sort neutral situations. And because they get adulated with this 'act or privilege' bullies are known to lack conscience and empathy.

Giving in to bullying is worse than bullying

Bullies are a worry until you decide to stand up to them, alone or collectively. That snatches away their entitlement and reduces them to scared individuals. Unfortunately, most Indian middle-class parents hardly teach their children to stand up to bullies. They try to circumvent around the problems, the way they have learnt from an earlier generation – "Avoid conflict". They never realise that their inability to act leads to larger repercussion, which can mushroom as an epidemic behaviour in society. And, that is how a large section of the generation of Boomers and Millenials were brought up. To comply and accept what bullies in school, college, work and society ask for. To protest in closed groups. To wait and raise a voice only if the neighbour has. Such docile behaviour over time has led to a world order with bullies in the political power circle, who try to force their agendas through instruments of power, like media and police. In the last few years America, Iran, India, China and many other countries have seen the rise of the political bully who is changing the fabric of society with selfish intentions. These bullies shape narratives, take advantage of it to further their respective political ambitions. Most boomers and millennials have allowed this phenomenon to mushroom because of the collective apathy to national problems and despair in seeing no action to protests over a period. So, what changed with the generation that has followed millennials, Gen-Z. This generation, although vulnerable has displayed different mindset to bullies or bullying. They grew up educated by the internet debunking archaic moral values of subservience. They grew up making opinions of right and wrong through peer understanding. And that perhaps makes all the difference. They collectively learnt to stand up against bullies and oppression in any form and order, because they want their world order to be "no cap" and free of "toxic vibes" with only "positive aura".

Gen-Z cannot be bullied

The last few weeks, I watched how our nation's Gen-Z collectively refused to be bullied by a government, that behaved like that petulant bully of school snatching lunch from the children. (Literally considering that innumerous videos surfaced where members of Delhi Police were seen taking away food meant for protestors for themselves from food delivery agents). If we observe closely, we will find striking similarities of a mental image of a bully and the government. Take for example the consistent narrative of a 56-inch-chest leader who is touted as a 'Vishwaguru,' his able aide, a home minister who professes as the self-styled ruthless 'Chanakya' of Indian politics and a coterie of other poster boys (men) in the party who strut around the country like a gang of bullies in high school waiting to take on any 'weakling.' This picture of the government, the way they steam roll through the different policies for their own power agenda, is defined in the psychology of a bully as "performance" of hierarchy. They hold a paranoia and urgency to close what they seek, so that the hierarchy is not destabilized. This is true for all bullies, real and imaginary. Be it Mogambo in Mr. India, Gabbar in Sholay, Draco Malfoy in Harry Potter, Thanos in Marvel or a minister in power. Each of them exhibits the traits of a bully, always in a tearing hurry to have their way, their egos validated. That is one thing of bullies. They have fragile egos which leads to their doom. As we saw in the case of the current protests. A group of young resilient kids stood up to the bully with steadfast resolve. Gen-Z refused to be bullied into submission. This is what I loved most of the entire protests.

How to deal with a bully like a Gen-Z?

Psychologist lay down three rules to deal with egoled bullying. First up is to not take it personally and be objective. The behaviour of the bully reflects the latter's inner weakness and not of the one being bullied. Abhijit Dipke, Ranka, Das and Sonam Wangchuk did exactly that. They did not take things emotionally and made the cause and the standoff bigger than themselves. Secondly it is advised repeatedly that to deal with bullies one needs to set boundaries, standing firm and refusing to feed into their need to fear and control. The entire Gen-Z in India, on ground or online, took on this by the book. They set firm boundaries by reminding the government what was not ok and why the oppression must stop. And finally, the last stand is to deflect with confidence. This is where the protest in my opinion stood out. GenZ's playbook of confidence was something that the government, media and police were completely unprepared for. Meaning how do you take on a brigade that addresses, the prime minister as a "Kuchu Pucchu" or has protest slogans that says, "Even my ex was less toxic than Dharmender Pradhan." How does a group of RAF personnels deal with a young girl who is seen repeatedly asking if they will be lathi charging, because she did not have her protein shake and needed to know.

The last word: The Indian Gen-Z handled the bullying of the government fearlessly. They not only pushed the bully to the corner of the class together but also sent a message to the dormant fence sitters of every generation that it is not ok to comply to bullies; that it is ok to take a stand, a stand for the right. That when a bully tries to push his way through, we need to be a Gandalf with a staff in our hand and tell him loud – "Thou shalt not pass".

(The author is an avid reader and observer of politics in India. The opinions expressed here are the author's own).

Letters to the Editor

Cyberbullying: Beyond the Screen

Editor,

With the advancement of technology and the internet, we are currently living in a world where communication, learning, and the way we express ourselves have changed completely. Because of the rapid development of technology and our growing attachment to the internet, we spend a large part of our lives online. While technology has made our lives easier, it has also brought new challenges. One of them is cyberbullying.

So what is Cyberbullying? Cyberbullying means bullying someone through the internet or digital platforms. It includes harassment, flaming, internet stalking, doxxing, impersonation, fraud, spreading false information, and other forms of online abuse. People use the internet to intentionally harm or ruin another person's life while hiding behind a screen, whether it is a computer, tablet, or mobile phone. According to UNICEF, more than one in three young people in 30 countries have experienced online bullying, showing that cyberbullying has become a growing problem across the world. As more people depend on the internet in their daily lives, stronger measures are needed to ensure the safety of internet users.

In India, the increasing use of smartphones and social media has made online harassment more common, especially among young people. Although many cases remain unreported, cyberbullying continues to affect thousands of people, causing emotional and psychological harm. Cyberbullying has indeed caused serious harm to many and, in some tragic cases, has even led to suicide because of continuous online harassment. Victims often suffer from anxiety, depression, fear, stress, and low self-esteem. Many lose confidence and feel isolated because of the abuse they receive online. Some people who face cyberbullying do not know what they should do or what precautions they should take. They are unaware that help is available through the police, the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal, and the National Cyber Crime Helpline (1930). If more people were aware of these services, many victims could receive help before the situation becomes worse.

The government should also take stronger measures to prevent cyberbullying by educating citizens about online safety and responsible internet use. More workshops, awareness campaigns, and cyber safety programmes should be organised in schools, colleges, and communities. The government should also strengthen cybersecurity and ensure that cyber laws are properly implemented to protect internet users.

In Meghalaya, the use of the internet is also increasing rapidly, especially among young people. To deal with cyber-related crimes, the Cyber Wing of the Meghalaya Police has been working to spread awareness and encourage people to report cyber offences. The Meghalaya Police has also collaborated with organisations such as the Datayug Society to educate citizens about cyber safety. A recent case from Meghalaya reminds us how serious cyberbullying and online exploitation can become. A young woman allegedly died by suicide after being a victim of sextortion by a man from Uttar Pradesh. This tragic incident makes us wonder whether she was too afraid to ask for help; whether she was blackmailed into remaining silent, or whether she simply did not know that help was available. Whatever the reason, no one should suffer in silence.

Cyberbullying is the intentional harming of another person through the internet. Sitting behind a screen and ruining someone's life may seem easy, but for the victim the pain is real. As individuals, we should all try to stop cyberbullying by promoting kindness and respect online. People should also be aware of the dangers of the internet and take precautions while using digital platforms. Through awareness, workshops, campaigns, and the proper use of available helplines, we can make the internet a safer place for everyone.

Be safe. Stay safe and report cyberbullying

Yours etc.,
Lasubon Kharbithai
Via email

Meghalaya Excise Rules Flouted

Editor,

As per the Meghalaya Excise Rules, no liquor shop can be located within 200 meters of a place of public worship, hospital, or educational institution. However, several retail liquor outlets are operating within close proximity of a prominent place of worship and a reputed CBSE school between the stretch from Polo Bazar to 4th Furlong of Shillong.

This raises serious questions regarding the licensing process followed by the Excise Department. Were the mandatory distance norms properly verified before granting licences? If the licences were issued in violation of the Rules, the circumstances under which such approvals were granted deserve an impartial and transparent investigation. I therefore, urge the State Government to immediately inspect all retail liquor shops in the said area and verify compliance with the mandatory distance requirement, suspend or cancel the licences of establishments found to be operating in violation of Rule 183(2)(a), conduct a comprehensive inquiry into the grant of such licences, fix accountability and take punitive action against persons responsible for such a serious lapse.

I also most respectfully implore the Hon'ble Meghalaya High Court to consider taking suo motu cognizance of this serious issue in the larger public interest so that the matter is judicially examined and appropriate directions are issued, should the alleged violations remain unaddressed. If the executive fails to enforce the law, the judiciary becomes the last constitutional guardian to ensure that the rule of law prevails and that statutory mandates are faithfully implemented.

Yours etc.,
D. Bhattacharjee
Shillong-1

Outrageous Propaganda

Editor,

I was struck with utter dismay after reading your newspaper report in the front page of The Shillong Times on July 27, 2026 captioned "VPP slams post claiming by-poll candidate's withdrawal".

The content revealed the opponent's daring attempt to tarnish the reputation of the VPP candidate, Batskhem Myrboh concerning the upcoming Shillong Lok Sabha by-poll, by using Artificial Intelligence (AI) to generate a fake picture which according to him is unmatched with his personality or dress.

Such type of dangerous plan, tantamount to a criminal act, is an outrageous propaganda and character assassination which deserves outright condemnation in the strongest term. This indicates the opponent's fear psychosis and nervousness toward the VPP candidate as the Shillong Lok Sabha by-poll is fast approaching.

It should be noted that persons involved in such obnoxious and dirty tricks can fool only a few voters, not all. I wish and hope that Myrboh wins the Shillong Lok Sabha seat.

Long live and march forward, VPP, with courage and fortitude for the future prosperity of the state and its people.

Yours etc.
Svetlana Wankhar
Via email

Long-term Educational Reforms Needed

Editor,

The nationwide protests against the rot that has set in the examination system and the subsequent resignation of the Union Education Minister have fixed only part of a deeper problem. Although the Union Cabinet has approved a draft Bill proposing stricter punishment for paper leaks, only time will show its success. However, deeper reforms are essential to restore public confidence. Nefarious activities like question paper leaks are a sign of an iniquitous examination system. Such flaws will betray the trust that thousands of students have reposed in the government and the examination system. It will result in frustration and despair in those who burned the midnight oil to achieve their goals. Such activities create an impression that success can be purchased rather than achieved. People who manipulate students for financial gains must be dealt with strictly. Stronger laws and fast-track courts may prevent such activities. On the other hand, long- term reforms are essential to correct the deep-rooted flaws.

Yours etc.,
Venu GS,
Kollam

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

"Discipline is remembering what you want."
— David Campbell

The Shillong Times
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Struggle on railways

JUST as railway development has been going in circles with no improvement in sight, its reservation system grows more chaotic each year. Now, the government is introducing a new reservation schedule, a 'token system' for queues, which it claims will help prospective passengers. In November 2024, it introduced new reservation rules, reducing the booking time from three months to two months. This only worsened the scenario. No one can secure a reservation online because the system shuts down within minutes of starting every morning. This happens even with Tatkal reservations, which involve higher charges. The inept handling of the systems and massive involvement of vested interests in the booking system have over the years created a situation where only VIPs like politicians and bureaucrats receive considerable relief. They get their reservations hassle-free. Ordinary people opting for rail travel find securing a reservation an uphill task.

Part-time Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw, who also handles myriad other departments including the all-important and money-spinning Information Technology, claims that about 90 per cent of railway ticket/seat/berth reservations are now made online. He was stressing the 'modernization' he has brought to an otherwise ailing sector. The Railways introduced the Rail Online system a year ago, which supposedly helps passengers book reserved and unreserved seats/berths, platform tickets, make enquiries, check PNR status and present grievances etc. That some 4.55 crore downloads were done so far, as Vaishnaw claimed, also proves people's desperation to use railway services. Despite these downloads, how effective this system will be is anybody's guess, considering the hiccups that have plagued the railway online systems so far.

In a nation where development is mostly restricted to specific states and geographical regions, the eastern sector remaining largely neglected by successive governments, migration for jobs is ever-increasing. For instance, crores of youths from the eastern region are working in both the north and the south. They have a hard time to travel to their homes, as reservations are hard to get. During festival times, this scenario gets worse. With special trains introduced selectively and on a limited scale, these youths pack themselves like cattle in the 'cattle class' and reach their destinations. A similar struggle awaits them for their return journey to their work places. Other passengers, including those who seek AC and upper class berths, meet with the same fate. When the minister claims that 89 per cent of reservations are done online, what he did not disclose was his own realization that most of these are advance, group bookings by cartels and travel agencies who then charge a bomb from customers. As in every sector, vested interests rule the roost. Narendra Modi as Prime Minister presided over all these all through these 12 years. The RSS that guides him in selective governance is simply unconcerned about any correctional steps. Their collective concern is only to make India a Hindu Rashtra – with all its inbuilt discriminations.

Meghalaya's Tourism Policy Needs Public Consultation

By Patricia Mukhim

The Meghalaya Tour Operators Association, the Meghalaya Tourism Development Forum and sundry other forums are not the only stakeholders of tourism in this state. Hence, when the Government formulates a Tourism Policy the public too should have been involved. Granted that the Government cannot invite the entire population of Meghalaya, it can and should have invited the Rangbah Shnong of tourist destinations since they are committed to public service even though theirs is an unpaid and sometimes thankless job. Tourism affects all of us; even though we don't gain a penny from this business, we are all impacted by the rise in carbon footprints. What is carbon footprint anyway? For the uninitiated carbon footprint refers to the amount of greenhouse gases (especially carbon dioxide) released into the atmosphere because of human activities.

Tourists increase carbon footprints because tourism itself consumes a lot of energy. The first is the high number of vehicles on our roads bringing tourists here. Then there's waste generation and unfortunately many may not even know that beyond Shillong there is no waste management system in place. About two years ago Sohra has signed a deal with a solid waste management from Guwahati but whether that has taken off is unclear yet. From the look of things that organisation has not started work yet for reasons best known to the Sohra tour promoters. Without a solid waste management system in place how is the waste treated as of today? Should this not have been a priority before selling the hills and dales; the captivating waterfalls and pristine Umngot river to the rest of the world? And now there are influencers a dime a dozen who are promoting the positives of Meghalaya but refuse to see its ugly underbelly – the garbage that collects in the ravines at every tourist spot and where humans dare not tread for they could fall, break their bones or die.

Chief Minister Conrad Sangma is himself a great advocate of toufism. Every time he takes of for some destination we all want to go and explore that place and soon tourists are thronging the place. But the infrastructure needed is hardly in place. For instance the CM inaugurated the glass restaurant at the Mawrah reservoir some months ago. Some of us who like Ulysses are afflicted by a wanderlust went to Mawrah with the hope of enjoying an evening in the Glass Café/Restaurant. Alas! The place has not yet opened and the locals informed us that the kitchen is still being constructed. Imagine our disappointment. And there's not a place within 10 kms of that location where we could have some tea, unless we drove on to Kongthong. To make up for that misadventure nature provided us with a breathtaking sunset scene as the rays shimmered in the lake and created magic. Then we saw the clouds travelling up from Bangladesh and enveloping the entire village. It is what we see in Nongjrong when the sun rises; in Mawrah the clouds turn romantic at sunset. Actually I don't have the flowery adjectives that influencers have or I could have explained this whole expedition into what would have resembled a rapture.

Let me now not wax eloquent on tourist sites but come to the mundane. On July 17 there was a tourism workshop to initiate a Heritage Tourism Policy for Meghalaya organised by Association for Conservation & Tourism (ACT) led by noted tour promoter Raj Basu in collaboration with Asian Confluence. In this workshop much as discussed about conserving the heritage sites such as the living root bridges, waterfalls, the folktale linked to them; the sacred groves and the stories around them and to bring them to the notice of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) so that the communities around these sites can conserve them and not let them be trampled upon by heartless humans. Sadly that workshop dod not have some key stakeholders in Tourism such as Alan West Kharkongor and Morningstar Khongthaw who has invested much in getting the attention of the UN body to the longest living root bridge at Mawkyrnot.

This workshop engaged at length on the need for community engagement in tourism so that the tourism sites remain resilient and able to reverse the carbon footprint per day. There was talk of 'sustainable' tourism. Now words like 'heritage' and 'sustainable' might be easy for bureaucrats and educated tour operators to understand and latch on to and articulate at different forums where they are called to speak. But do the Khasi, Jaintia, or Garo communities know what those words mean in their languages? In fact if the state's Tourism Policy is not translated into the three languages it will be a futile expedition if we expect the communities to buy into the tourism model that the state is trying to promote.

In any case the whole process of attracting UNESCO attention to any place worth that attention is ridden with pitfalls. The process is tedious but not impossible if some knowledgeable folks are entrusted with the task. I recall Sanjeev Shanker who spent a lot of time researching living root bridges and spent considerable time in the wilds of East Khasi Hills. Perhaps there was a fund that supported the project. But one is not sure if the researcher has in fact produced anything in writing. If he has we have not seen it. But perhaps he was the man behind setting in motion the process of getting the UNESCO tag for the Nongriat Double Decker Living Root Bridges and the longest one at Mawkyrnot.

In Meghalaya we speak of "community" as if the humans that constitute that community are of one mind and agree on everything; have the same common interests and share the same background. That is not the case today. Some in the community are filthy rich and for them tourism offers opportunities to set up guest houses, resorts and home stays and employing the poorer members of the community to work in those places. Can those poor folks have any voice that matters? Will the Dorbar Shnong listen to its poorer and weaker members before taking any tourism-related decision? No way! This is evident even in the daily affairs of the Dorbar Shnong where decisions are taken by elderly male members and women are only asked to speak when it concerns their Seng Kynthei. And even then women have to speak sparingly else they will be called hens that crow (Sorry to repeat this but women have to get over this aphorism that is meant to silence them and prevent them from speaking on matters that actually impinge on their lives).

Now coming back to tourism, the Tour Operators body had on Wednesday submitted a proposal to the Tourism Minister seeking a ban on cooking at various tourist destinations. It had become a habit especially for day tourists to bring stoves, pressure cookers, pots etc to Sohra and elsewhere and start cooking their own food, claiming diet restrictions; they do not eat red meat, beef etc. As far as I know, no "Kong Shop" ever cooks beef in Meghalaya. They know their customers and they usually bend over backwards to please the tourists. The tourists who bring their own food do so because they don't want to spend. They want to escape the heat in their states but want to spend as little as possible. So is that tourism or a picnic party? Does Meghalaya want tourists or picnickers. So yes the decision to disallow cooking is great but an after-thought. Why was it not thought of earlier?

The other worrying factors are the footfalls which have turned places like Kynrem Falls into a huge theatre of the absurd. The place looks like an oversold Bryan Adams concert venue where people are falling over each other to take selfies, family pictures and what have you. And then there are unregulated shops that have sprung up anywhere and everywhere. This is Meghalaya's Tourism playbook. Shops spring up at the drop of a hat and what do they sell? They sell tea, Maggi noodles, and chips - the cheapest meal for tourists. Think how many of those Maggi packages are collected daily and where do you think they are thrown? Into the ravine where the rapid waterfalls carry to places beyond Sohbar, perhaps to the plains of Ichamati and Bholaganj. When will this footfall be regulated? The number of vehicles per day violates all the norms of sustainable tourism.

And then coming to the parking fees. All those who collect parking fees at all tourist destinations must be authorised to do so either by the Dorbar Shnohg or by the people who own the parking space and give receipts to their clients- the tourists. Many tourists have complained of not being given parking receipts. We speak of sustainable tourism but forget there's such a thing as accountable tourism too.

Meghalaya needs to adopt one principle of tourism which is that "Tourism should enrich a place without exhausting it. In places like Shillong, Sohra and Dawki etc., that balance is already tilted towards unsustainable tourism.

Apologies for stepping into a domain of the tour operators but as a tourist in one's state one does have the right to share one's anxieties without stepping on anyone's toes or purse.

Rethinking Tourism

What Kind of Tourism Should Meghalaya Welcome

By Uttam Saikia

Meghalaya is experiencing a tourism boom that would have seemed improbable only a decade ago. From the misty cliffs of Sohra to the pristine waters of Dawki and bustling cafés of Shillong, the state has become one of India's most sought-after travel destinations. The state government, with support from the Centre, remains heavily invested in this sector. Government data suggests that nearly 18 lakh visitors travelled to Meghalaya in 2025, a high number for a small hill state like Meghalaya. The economic benefits are evident. Homestays report full occupancy during peak seasons, taxi drivers shuttle full loads of visitors across the state, roadside eateries do brisk business, and even parking attendants earn more than before. The tourism sector is estimated to have contributed approximately Rs 725 crore to the state economy in the 2025–26 financial year. At first glance, this is a success story worth celebrating. Yet, beyond the optimism lies a more uncomfortable question: Is the current boom in tourism sustainable, and is it the kind of tourism that Meghalaya should be encouraging?

The lesson from another mountain state

To understand what may lie ahead, it is helpful to look beyond Meghalaya's borders. Having spent many years in Shillong and previously in Himachal Pradesh for about a decade, another tourism-dependent hill state, I cannot help but notice parallels. Himachal receives roughly ten times more tourists than Meghalaya, and tourism contributes substantially to its economy. However, the costs of unabated growth are increasingly difficult to ignore. During peak summer and winter holidays, towns such as Shimla, Manali, Dharamshala, and Solan often become overwhelmed by visitors. Traffic stretches for kilometers, water shortages are common, and both tourists and residents struggle with overcrowding. What was once marketed as an escape to the mountains frequently turns into hours spent trapped in a queue of vehicles.

More worrying is the pressure on the fragile Himalayan environment. The seismically active and young mountain terrain of the state is exceptionally sensitive to human disturbance. Blasting and cutting mountains for road widening, tunnelling, and uncontrolled tourist inflows are detrimental to the landscapes. Massive tourist inflows mean more construction, more waste, more vehicles, and greater stress on rivers, forests, and slopes already vulnerable to climate-related disasters. The devastating cloudbursts and flash floods that struck Himachal Pradesh between 2018 and 2023, including the heavily visited Kullu Valley, serve as a stark warning. The state reportedly suffered losses running into thousands of crores of rupees, and hundreds of lives were lost due to the floods. Subsequent studies by G.B. The Pant National Institute of Himalayan Environment identified unregulated tourism, excessive construction, and economic activity in flood-prone areas as factors that worsened the destruction. Researchers have recommended assessing the carrying capacity (i.e., the number of people a place can hold without putting the environment at risk) of different regions and regulating tourism accordingly.

Shillong is already feeling the burden

Tourism in Meghalaya has not yet reached the level of Himachal Pradesh, but some warning signs are becoming difficult to ignore. Because Shillong serves as the gateway to most of the state's tourist attractions, the city bears a disproportionate share of the burden created by the rising visitor numbers. Anyone who has driven through Police Bazaar, Laitumkhrah, Mawlai, or the routes leading to Sohra during a long weekend will recognize the change. Vehicle ownership has increased sharply. Official figures indicate that more than 20,000 new vehicles are registered each year in the East Khasi Hills district, which accounts for nearly half of the state's vehicle population. In addition, thousands of tourist taxis enter the city daily, resulting in increasingly familiar long traffic jams, extended commuting times, and worsening air quality. This is not a minor inconvenience for residents. Time lost in traffic is time not spent working, studying, or with family. The irony is striking: tourists are attracted to Meghalaya's serenity, while locals increasingly find their daily lives less enjoyable.

Numbers do not tell the whole story

Tourism is often gauged in terms of footfall, hotel occupancy, and revenue. However, these numbers do not tell the whole story. A destination can become more profitable while becoming less liveable. It can attract more visitors while losing the very qualities that made people want to visit in the first place. All major hill stations in Himachal are much less liveable now than before due to overtourism. I guess the Shillongites would tell the same story. The real debate is not whether Meghalaya should have tourism; it already does, and it will remain an important source of livelihood for the state and its people. The debate is about the type of tourism that the state should pursue. Should the goal be to maximize the number of visitors each year? Or should it be to attract visitors who stay longer, spend more locally, and place less pressure on roads, water sources, and fragile ecosystems? In this background, it would be pertinent to mention what Bhutan has done recently to regulate tourism through the "High value low impact" model. Under this model, each visitor is required to pay a hefty "Sustainable Development Fee" daily, which goes towards funding free education, healthcare, and environmental conservation. Bhutan's strict tourist guidelines ensure that tourism does not overwhelm the environment.

A Different Model for Meghalaya

Many mountain destinations worldwide are beginning to shift away from mass tourism toward responsible, low-impact tourism. For Meghalaya, the government can promote longer tourist stays rather than quick weekend trips, promote community-run homestays instead of large-scale construction, improve regional air connectivity, limit development in environmentally sensitive areas, and enforce strict waste-management rules. It can also commission scientific studies to determine the carrying capacities of major tourist attractions and regulate tourism accordingly. We cannot stop tourism, but we can regulate it in the greater interest of the state, its citizens, and the environment. This will ensure that tourism continues to provide income without eroding the state's natural or cultural assets.

A choice to make before it is too late

Fortunately, Meghalaya still has the opportunity to choose its path before tourist influx becomes overwhelming. The state's natural bounties or even its unique indigenous culture are not renewable resources that can be endlessly exploited. Once damaged, they are difficult or even impossible to restore. The current tourism boom and the government efforts deserves mention but should also prompt introspection. If Meghalaya measures success only by rising footfall, it may eventually inherit the same problems faced by many overexploited hill states. The more important question is not "How many tourists can Meghalaya attract?" but rather "How many tourists can it welcome while remaining unmistakably Meghalaya?" This is a debate that civil society must start deliberating now, before it is too late.

(The writer is a senior scientist with Zoological Survey of India Shillong. The views expressed are personal).

Letters to the Editor

Assam Floods: A Cry for Help and a Call for Humanity

Editor,

Whenever I see the heartbreaking images of floods in Assam, my heart fills with deep sorrow. The rising waters do not only destroy homes; they wash away the dreams, memories, and years of hard work of thousands of families. Assam and floods have become almost inseparable. Every year, the mighty Brahmaputra and its tributaries bring both life and challenges to this beautiful land. This year too, several parts of Assam, including Sivasagar, are facing a painful crisis. Many families have lost their homes, crops, livestock, and essential belongings.

The tragedy has become more severe due to the cloudburst in Nagaland. Sudden floods gave many people no time to escape. Many precious lives have been lost, and several people are still missing, leaving families in deep sorrow.

The pain of flood victims cannot be measured only by the loss of houses. Many students have lost their books and educational materials. Many young people have lost certificates and important documents needed for their future. Farmers have lost their crops and years of hard work. Many domestic animals have also lost their lives.

Behind every flooded village is a human story—a mother struggling to feed her children, an elderly person searching for shelter, and a farmer watching his dreams disappear under the water.

Floods are not only a natural disaster; they become a social and economic crisis. Even after the water recedes, people need food, clean drinking water, medicines, shelter, education support, and help to rebuild their lives.

I believe Assam's flood crisis deserves the attention and compassion of the entire nation. India is one family, and when one part suffers, the whole nation should stand together. Even a small contribution from many people can bring hope to those who have lost everything.

However, relief alone is not enough. Assam needs long-term solutions—scientific river management, stronger embankments, improved flood forecasting, erosion control, and sustainable policies to protect future generations. The people of Assam are known for their courage and resilience. They rebuild their lives after every disaster, but they should not have to fight alone.

I sincerely appeal to every citizen of India to please remember the flood victims of Assam. Share their stories, support genuine relief efforts, and stand with those who need help.

A nation becomes truly strong not only through development, but through the compassion and humanity of its people. Let us come together to bring hope, dignity, and a new beginning to the flood-affected people of Assam.

Yours etc.,
Banjit Sarmah
Dhekiajuli, Assam

Irregular PHE Water Supply Affecting Upper Mawprem

Editor,

This piece is to draw the urgent attention of the concerned authorities in the PHE Department to the acute water crisis faced by residents of Upper Mawprem for the past three weeks. The crisis has arisen because of the erratic and severely reduced water supply to the PHE feeder tanks, which has often been disrupted without prior notice. These tanks are the main facilities used to store, manage, and distribute water throughout the locality. When the feeder tanks are not properly replenished, the taps of an entire community might go dry too.

As a result, the whole area has been deprived of consistent access to potable water. Those who can afford it are calling private water suppliers to meet their needs, while poorer households are left completely helpless.

It is heart-rending to see children and elderly residents going from pillar to post at the crack of dawn in search of a bucket of water. Some return home after two hours carrying water, while many others return with empty buckets.

What is unfortunate is that in such a situation, neither the municipal authorities nor the PHE Department has bothered to send tankers or provide even interim relief to the suffering residents.

We therefore, in the larger interest of the residents, request the authorities concerned to act promptly and take effective steps to restore "regular water supply" to Nongsohphoh Upper Mawprem. The authorities must also ensure that the feeder tanks are consistently filled and that supply is not disrupted for extended periods. No resident should be left thirsty for want of water.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

Darkness on Mc Cabe Road, 4th Furlong: Immediate Action Needed

Editor,

Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, I wish to draw the immediate attention of the concerned authorities including the Shillong Municipal Board and the Meghalaya Power Distribution Corporation Limited (MePDCL), regarding the non-functional street lights in the 4th Furlong area, along McCabe Road.

For at least a month now, not a single street light is operational along this entire stretch. As soon as dusk falls, the McCabe Road area is plunged into pitch darkness. Walking or driving in the area has become an unnecessary hazard for residents, motorists, and pedestrians alike.

It is not acceptable that an entire residential stretch remains completely dark due to neglect. This also heightens security concerns for women, students, and senior citizens, while providing cover for anti-social elements and petty crimes.

I strongly urge the Shillong Municipal Board, MePDCL, and the local Dorbar Shnong to inspect the road, replace the broken lights, and restore power to the street lamps before some serious incident occurs.

Yours etc.,
Hrishikesh Raychaudhuri,
Via email

Tall Claims on Ethanol Compatibility of Vehicles Without Evidence

Editor,

The Union government's revelation in Parliament that it has not conducted any assessment about the proportion of vehicles in India compatible with E20 fuel points to a sharp contrast between India's advancements in green energy and the reality on the ground. A transition like this calls for comprehensive planning, preparation and evidence-based testing. While the government insists that studies and trials have proved the fuel is safe, a policy that affects millions of people must be based on data with a proven track record. The government's claim that crores of vehicles are safely running on ethanol-blended petrol lacks corroborative data. It raises several questions. How many of these vehicles are E20 compatible or designed for that purpose? Without authentic information the government's assurance about the safety of E20 is not convincing. Public concern is expressed through protests and the formation of the E20 Janta Party. The concerns of consumers must be addressed. While the government's attempts to go green are commendable, the implementation of the E20 transition lacks planning and preparation.

Yours etc.,
Venu GS,
Kollam

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